

**THE TERMS
OF HER INHERITANCE
MIGHT BE...
HER LIFE**

Nancy was bound to WADE HOUSE for at least one year—or until her late husband Jeffrey Wade would have been of age to claim his millions. She was chained to the will and caprice of a family plagued by madness and delusions from an unsavory past.

Bella—the passionate, enigmatic housekeeper with a wildly unexpected stake in the family fortune and a fierce desire to protect it.

Tony—her late husband's brother. Lean, sardonic, troubled. Witness to a murder long overdue.

Ernestine—Mother. Unstable, helpless. Not to be trusted, they thought.

Seward—cousin. Guardian of the secret that shadowed their fate

They would sooner see Nancy Wade dead than one of them.

WADE HOUSE is the latest addition to Signet's fast-selling Signet Gothic series. Recent novels in this series include Monica Heath's **Dunleary**, Virginia Coffman's **The Demon Tower** and Caroline Farr's **House of Tombs**.

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WADE HOUSE
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Wade House

A Gothic
Novel by

FLORENCE HURD

A young widow trapped
by murder and madness
in a ghoulish country
house—a ruin haunted
by past romance...
and a demon lover



7:15 Sunday
Mrs C's
all shot

A GUN CRACKED,
SILENCE EXPLODED,
AND JEFFREY WADE WAS DEAD.

Nancy Wade had just murdered her husband, a navy pilot who had already been killed in a plane crash. She had caused the death of this man who would mysteriously disappear a few minutes later leaving an unquestioned legacy worth millions to their unborn child.

Why had the handsome, rakish ne'er-do-well romanced and won the simple, virginal teenager? Why did he choose such an unlikely subject for his even more unlikely venture?

Overwhelmed by the proposal of a lover she never dared imagine, Nancy followed Jeff into the clutches of the unholy quartet he called family—and into WADE HOUSE with its childlike ghost of a scandalous past.

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WADE HOUSE

BY

Florence Hurd



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ONE

I have not always lived with the dreadful memory of Wade House.

There was a time when a mourning dove, sitting high up in an elm's charcoal branches, calling with its bittersweet echoing cry, did not remind me of the death and terror that lay beyond the rusty iron-grille gate and sagging façade of that decaying house. That was in Colton, when, as a young girl of twenty, I would hurry along the cobbled sidewalk, flanked by a row of just such elms, pursued by the haunting cries of similar doves.

That was where it all began, I suppose, in Colton. I was born and raised in that small Midwestern prairie town, where life centered around State University. My stepmother ran a boarding house for girl students. We had eight of them, two to a room in the four bedrooms upstairs. They came and went with the semesters like the leaves on the elms. Even when I was grown and enrolled in the University, I never became part of their lives. I was Bee Davenport's stepdaughter, Nancy, a nice girl, but rather dull.

My stepmother was the live wire, with her trim figure, her abundant gold-red hair, her sparkling eyes, her gay laughter. She was closer to "our girls" than I, sharing their little jokes, their stories of impulsive love, their disappointments. It made no difference that she was a woman approaching middle-age with a grown girl and an ineffectual husband that she must support. Her hours spent in the dreary rounds of shopping, hovering over the humid, hot stove, scrubbing, washing, cleaning, did nothing to dim her fun-loving spirits or to change her self-image of "Bea, belle of the campus." That's what she had been when she met and married my father. And that's what she would always be.

She lived vicariously through her roomers. And it disturbed

her that I was not like them. "Why don't you get your nose out of that book," she would say. "There's a tea dance at Weller Hall. Betty (or Alice or Sissy) is going and you can wear the red dress I got you last week. It looks so nice and . . ." Or, "I'm having Mrs. Gardner's boys in for punch and cookies this afternoon. Try to be here, won't you?" That was mother in her more tactful, diplomatic moments. But she was more often exasperated. "I don't know why you're always sulking about. With all the thousands of unattached men on campus it seems to me that you could get a date at least *one* Saturday night a month." Diplomacy or exasperation, her remarks only served to drive me further into my shell.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be popular, to be a part of the feverish Saturday night ritual—the girls clamoring for the use of the bathroom, borrowing shoes from one, a sweater from another. But I was neither pretty nor socially at ease, and rather than compete and fail, as I surely thought I would in the frenetic college whirl, I walled myself up behind my books and my studies.

So it was that Sissy, our most popular boarder, found me one Saturday night, seated in the empty kitchen. I was immersed in *Gone with the Wind*, waltzing with Rhett Butler in a far-off imaginary world. "Nancy, you've got to help me," she implored.

"Hmmm?" I said, drifting up from my antebellum ballroom. "What?"

"I'm desperate," she wailed. "Tod needs a blind date for a friend or he says we won't go to the dance." Tod was Sissy's current mad love, and the dance was one Sissy had been looking forward to all week.

"Can't he get his own date?" I asked.

"She stood him up," Sissy said frankly. "And everyone else is gone."

There it was, the unvarnished truth. Sissy was desperate and everyone else was gone. Who else but Nancy would do as a last resort? "I don't think I'd care to go," I lied. I wanted very much to go, but I had *some* pride.

"Oh, come on, Nan. Be a sport. Just this once, do me a favor. *Please.*"

"I don't know. . . ."

"You haven't anything else to do, have you?" She knew

I didn't. "It won't hurt you to get out. Now, come on. I'll help you get dressed."

She took my arm and pulled me into my room just off the kitchen. While I sat on the bed she dug through my closet, pulling out and discarding what she found until she came to the red dress. "This will be fine," she said throwing it over her arm. "Come on upstairs and I'll do your hair. We've got to hurry. They'll be here in fifteen minutes."

I sat at her desk-dressing table watching in the clouded mirror as she primped and fussed, powdered and rouged me. When she was through I had not miraculously turned into the beautiful princess, but I had to admit that there was an improvement. My dark hair, usually stuffed carelessly behind my ears, was brushed and polished into a shining shoulder-length sweep. The rouge and lipstick had put color into my pale face. "All you have to do is keep smiling," coached Sissy, "and you'll look wonderful."

"Who's my date?" I asked.

"Didn't I tell you? It's Jeff Wade. He's handsome and he's rich. What more could you ask?"

"Is he at school here?"

"No, but he was last year. He was Tod's roommate then and he was a junior. Then he decided that instead of coming back to school he'd enlist in the Naval Air Force. He's just finished at pre-flight school and stopped off here to see his old buddies before he goes on to some Air Station. I guess Tod said it was for primary training. Anyway he's only going to be here for tonight. That's why Tod insisted I get him a date, or we couldn't go to the dance."

We heard the front door bang shut, and a male voice shouted up the stairs. "Sissy! You girls ready?"

The smile I had been practicing froze on my face. In a flash I could foresee the evening, the long hours ahead of me. I would stumble clumsily over my partner's feet in the first dance, stiff, unyielding, and then I would sit the rest of the time, talking to the other wallflowers in shrill gaiety while my date danced with the prettier girls.

"For heaven's sake!" Sissy's voice broke in. "Don't sit there as if you were on your way to the electric chair. Here. . . ." She burrowed deep into a cluttered bureau drawer and pulled out a half-full whiskey bottle. "A snort of this will fix you up. You'll probably never see him again, so why

worry?" She poured a drink into her toothbrush glass and handed it to me. "Bottoms up!"

I drank it dutifully like a dose of medicine. The whiskey burned and stung, then glowed like a warm fire inside me. I was full of reckless courage as we went out to the stairs. But as I looked down and saw Jeff Wade, more darkly handsome than I had ever imagined, tall, self-confident, dark eyes sparkling, my false courage fled, my knees turned to water and I would have retreated if Sissy hadn't held my hand tightly.

"A red dress!" Jeff Wade shouted. "My date has a red dress!"

"Red is for courage," I said, meaning it.

Jeff thought it uproariously funny. "I'll be the brave bull!" he said, putting an upraised finger on either side of his head and prancing about the entry hall. He was so ludicrous, I laughed. We all laughed. Jeff swept us through the door on gales of merriment.

Magically, unbelievably, the whole evening went that way, packed with gaiety, pointless laughter, noisy, boisterous fun. My awkward feet were hardly noticed, the dance floor was so jammed. And as for conversation, no one could hear a word anyway. Jeff was flatteringly attentive. He was funny, he was gay. He said he liked my hair, my dress, the way I laughed. If I had been more astute I would have noticed that he disappeared every now and then to spike his punch, and that his attentions became more pronounced whenever a certain girl (Terry was her name; Sissy informed me that she was the one that had stood Jeff up) whirled by. But I was living in a dream-come-true. I had a handsome man as an escort. I was the envy of other girls. I was "in"; part of the festivities.

I can remember how the bare elm branches glistened under patches of lamp light as we drove home through the darkened streets. Jeff held my hand while light and shadow flickered softly by. There was no need to talk. I was happy, drunk with exhilaration. Jeff took me in his arms on the darkened porch and kissed me long and expertly. And I, awakened, responding, was sure that he shared some part of my undefined, yet shattering emotion. "I'll write you," were his good-night words. That Saturday night and on into Sun-

day morning, December 7, 1941, was the most wonderful of my life.

Pearl Harbor jolted most of us out of our insular, immediate preoccupations. But even amidst the frenzied excitement in our classes, the speculation of what branch of service whose boyfriend would go into, I thought only of Jeff Wade. Day followed day and he did not write. Each time I saw the gray billed cap of the mailman my heart would pound with anticipation. I would sort through the mail with nervous fingers, tossing aside letters for Sissy, Mary, Esther, bills for Mother, circulars, sale announcements, invitations to openings, my spirit deflating to acute disappointment. There never was a word from Jeff.

I made up all sorts of excuses for him; Jeff had lost my address, he was too busy to write, or he was the sort who hated to write letters. But tomorrow, the next day, the next week, I would hear from him. He would tell me how sorry he was that he hadn't written before, he had been meaning to, he had been thinking of me ever since our date.

The damp winds and pale sun of April budded the elms. From some planetary distance we heard that Bataan Peninsula had fallen. Still no word from Jeff. The tight buds of April feathered into new green leaves and the little roses, red and pink, bloomed along the fences. It was May and Corregidor surrendered. The mail came with regular monotony, but there was nothing for me.

I became bold one day, and screwing up my courage, went up to Sissy's room to ask if she could get Jeff's address for me from Tod. I had hardly mentioned Jeff's name when she launched into a gossipy account of Jeff's torrid correspondence with Terry and how he was burning up the telephone lines, piling up the bills, talking to her. A thin, icy sharp blade turned inside me. I wanted to cry out at the pain of it. But instead I sat dumbly on Sissy's cluttered bed while she wound her hair into tight pincurls, chattering on with a bobby pin between her teeth. "He's nuts about her, but she doesn't care crackers. She's getting engaged to Franklin. She hasn't told Jeff yet, though. I don't think it's fair. . . I mean leading him on that way, do you?"

"No," I answered in a small voice. At least, I told myself, there was that tiny comfort. Terry didn't like him, didn't want Jeff.

Then it was June. We were plunged into final examinations and I had almost given up on Jeff when, miracle of miracles, I got a card from him. It was one of those silly-type "wish-you-were-here" cards, and the message from Jeff was brief enough. "Finally am getting to fly," he said. "It's great! How's the old red dress? From the brave bull, Jeff." That was all. I read and reread those ridiculous words a thousand times. He remembered. He remembered my red dress, the joke he had made about it.

I answered the card, of course. Three times. My letters were composed with care. I labored to make them breezy, witty. I made elaborate funnies about the girls, myself, my classes. I asked about him, his flying, his plane, his instructor. The intensity of my words fairly burned the paper. But there was no return letter.

The summer days came and were centuries long, unbearably hot. Waking and dressing were a torture. I could not eat and began to grow thin. The classes I took in summer session to pass the time were a bore. I never heard a word the professors said. I had to read a passage in my text twice, three times, before I could assimilate its meaning. I walked a lot that summer, long rambling walks, anywhere, just to get away from the house and Mother's scolding. She thought it absurd for a girl to eat her heart out for any man. "There are too many other fish in the sea," she would say. But not for me, I'd repeat silently.

Autumn came—and the yellow-brown elm leaves crunched underfoot. I wanted to get away, somewhere, someplace that was not familiar, but instead, listlessly, I enrolled for the Fall semester.

One day, toward dusk, I came home to find something I had not dared dream or hope for. Jeff was sitting in the parlor. Mother was hovering, simpering over him, plying him with coffee and cookies. He was in uniform, handsomer than even I had remembered. I was so stunned, for a moment I could not utter a word. Then a sort of crazy delirium hit me. It was true! Jeff was back! He hadn't forgotten me. "Hello, Nancy," he said, and I knew he was there for real.

The first thing he told me, after Mother had gushingly, pointedly, left us alone, was that Terry had married Franklin and that he couldn't care less. I nodded in dumb, sympathetic silence. He went on and on about Terry's perfidity,

but I scarcely heard a word. I listened to the thrumming of my heart, my eyes never leaving his face. At last, he turned to me, sitting so close to him, and gave me a slow smile. "You're not mad at me because I didn't write?"

I shook my head. "Oh, no, Jeff." I couldn't tell him that it had been an agony waiting for his letter, that hope changing to disappointment had drained my will.

"Good girl," he said bending to kiss my forehead. And it was as if he had never given me cause for one moment's pain.

Jeff stayed the week. I saw him every day. We took long walks, sometimes we picnicked on the grassy banks of the river. In the evenings we would go to the movies or sit on the squeaky porch swing in the chill autumn dusk. Always he held my hand, my arm. He was close, he was warm. *He* talked mostly. First it was about Terry, then gradually, to my inner delight, less and less about her, and more about his experiences at flight school. He was on his way to the West Coast to an Air Station there to finish his training. Had he told me that his home was on the West Coast, too? And did I know that when he reached the age of twenty-five he would be a millionaire? I gave the proper gasp of surprise. It didn't really matter to me. What mattered was that I was with him, that he called, that he came, that I saw him every day.

On the night before he was to leave we went out to dinner, some place that had once been a roadhouse but had fallen into sleazy neglect. The tablecloths were stained, the waiter was fat and surly with dirty fingernails, and the floor looked as if it hadn't been swept in a week. Chianti bottles clotted with old wax, one to a table, held lighted candles. Their flickering light could not hide the grimy ceiling and walls, the torn leather banquettes, the thumb-stained menus. But if that roadhouse had been the most elegant of dining rooms with impeccable silver, glittering crystal, soft music and unobtrusive service, I couldn't have been happier. Jeff was so masculine, such a beautiful, virile man. I thought that I could look at him forever and never get tired.

Jeff had three highballs before dinner and two more with his meal. I sipped slowly on a sherry while he talked on and on. I was mostly silent, trying to respond or laugh in the right places. This was our last night together and it hurt just to think of it. Toward the end of the meal he became sober,

serious. "My chances for coming back aren't too great," he said suddenly. He was stirring his coffee slowly, the corners of his mouth turned down.

"Oh, Jeff, please don't say that." I didn't want to think of him as dead. It was worse than his going away and never coming back.

"Miss me?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I would."

"You know," he went on, smiling at me, "you're the only girl who's ever really understood me."

Trite, worn, meaningless words. It was the same phrase used over and over again by all those with self-pity who had found a willing ear. But I did not possess such simple wisdom then. I was foolishly, unthinkingly enthralled with Jeff Wade, and his statement only served to further inflate my already burgeoning infatuation.

"All the fellows are getting married," he said. "They want something to come back to. It makes it easier when you think about it. A wife waiting for you."

I didn't dare meet his eyes. I fiddled with the handle of my coffee cup.

"I need someone like you," he went on. "Quiet, steady. Someone who won't go running after the first pair of pants when I leave." I met his eyes, then. They were burning with a strange fire. He signalled the waiter and ordered another drink. "No kidding. You're wonderful. You listen to all my gripes. Smile, laugh at my jokes, even when they aren't very funny. Nancy . . . you'd make the best wife. . . ."

"Thank you," I murmured.

"How would you like to come with me?" he asked suddenly.

I forced a laugh. He was joking, of course. Maybe he had already had too much to drink.

"No, I'm not kidding," he said, almost reading my thoughts. He took my hand in his. His eyes never lost their bright shine. "Let's you and me go across the state line and get married."

Married! He hadn't just been talking. He was asking me to marry him. I had never dared dream of being his wife. Mrs. Jeffrey Wade. No, it was his way of teasing me.

"Well?" He squeezed my hand, but he didn't smile. "I mean it."

I would be his wife. He would never go away again. Not

from me. I would never have to wait hopelessly for a letter. Even if he went off to war, letters would come. Because I was his wife.

"Don't you love me?" he asked, a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Oh, Jeff, I do. I do." All my fervent longing was in those words. How incredibly naïve I was! For I never asked if *he* loved me, never asked a single question. Perhaps, I was afraid he'd retract his offer, or maybe, I thought, in those rushing, hectic wartime days, the amenities of courting had to be dispensed with. They were not important. Jeff had asked me to marry him. Wasn't *that* all that mattered?

An hour later we were standing in front of a justice of the peace across the state line. The justice was a little balding man with gold-rimmed spectacles and a lisp. His wife, arms akimbo, stood watching us with a mixture of pity and scorn. The witnesses I cannot recall. "To love, honor, cherith. . . in thickneth and in health. . . ." I drank in every syllable of the ancient ritual as if it had been uttered for the first time. Jeff slipped his class ring on my finger, he kissed me, and I was married.

I called Mother from Pennington, where we had found an old country hotel that would take us without luggage. I had imagined that Mother would be delighted at my marriage. Shy, plain, stick-in-the-mud Nancy had landed a handsome, well-to-do husband. But she spluttered in anger at the news. "Couldn't you wait?" she cried. "I wanted a proper wedding for you."

"Jeff has to leave tomorrow for the West Coast," I explained.

"He could have gotten an extension," she said impatiently. "What will my friends think?"

"Let them think what they want," I said.

"Maybe we can have a wedding, anyway. There's the most beautiful mother-of-the-bride dress at Longtons. It's a beige lace . . . and. . . ."

"Mother," I said firmly. "That's out. We've had our wedding."

"Nancy," she lowered her voice, "you didn't *have* to get married, did you . . . I mean. . . ."

"No, Mother," I said with great weariness. Her insinuation did not irritate me. Nothing my stepmother said could

bother me anymore. "I'm sorry about the wedding. I'll be home in the morning to get my things."

"But, Nancy——"

"Good-bye, Mother."

Jeff and I took the train for California the next afternoon. It was mobbed with other servicemen. Jeff found several cronies who had gone to flight school with him and thirty minutes after the train left Colton they were deep in poker, smoke, and beer bottles in the lounge car. But I didn't mind. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to speculate on my happiness in private, to examine it, to gloat upon it, like a miser counting gold. I sat at the window of the Pullman car, an unread book of poems, Edna St. Vincent Millay it was, on my lap, while the countryside, the cities and the towns rolled past.

I saw very little of Jeff on that trip. He was engrossed in his game. "Those guys are into me for a hundred bucks," he said. "And I'm going to get it back." I tried to find out more about his family, about his home, which would shortly be mine. "The house is old-fashioned," he said. "You'll like it. Nice and comfortable. You'll like Mom, too. She's a little dotty, but nice. And there's Mrs. Kingsley."

"Who is Mrs. Kingsley?" I asked.

"She's our housekeeper, been with us since I was born. She's a peach."

Mother was dotty, Mrs. Kingsley was a peach. I tried to visualize them. "Is there anyone else?"

"Cousin Seward. He's been hanging around for a while. He's about Mom's age."

"And your father?"

"He died when I was three years old."

"Haven't you any brothers or sisters?"

"Just Tony. Haven't seen him for years. He's about eight and a half years older than I. And I did have a sister, but she died before I was born."

I could see Jeff's mother with a large hat, a basket on her arm, cutting roses in the garden; Mrs. Kingsley, round as a peach, wiping her hands on her apron; and Cousin Seward smoking a pipe. I wanted to know more about them, much more. But I could not get anything else out of Jeff. Was he too engrossed with his card game, impatient to be off to his friends, to answer my questions? Or was he being purposely reticent? A faint disturbing ripple broke across my

placid self-content. But then a group of sailors at the front of the car broke into a rollicking rendition of "Deep in the Heart of Texas," the train roared down the grade of the San Bernardino pass into a valley of orange groves. I stared in delight at the fruit hung on jade trees like orange Christmas balls. We were in California.

TWO

We arrived at the red tile-roofed station in San Diego in the late afternoon. Jeff retrieved our baggage from the milling, shouting throng of waiting Marines and sailors, and hailed a taxi. He gave an address on Maywood Avenue on Point Lobos. Traffic was heavy. "Looks like we hit the first shift coming off at Consolidated," said the cabdriver as we stopped, started, and stopped again. A steady stream of aircraft workers, like lemmings hurrying to the sea, were crossing the street to the parking lot or the long line of buses waiting for them.

But once we were past them we entered the residential section, and I looked around me with the same sense of wonder I had felt when I saw my first orange trees. Flaming bougainvillea climbed pink stucco houses, thick, yellow-tipped fan palms squatted on green lawns, smooth trunked palms topped with incongruous clusters of fronds lined the street. Now and then I had a glimpse of the harbor and the matchstick masts of a boat marina. To my right, as we drove past a canyon, I looked down to the wide stretch of the Pacific.

I plied Jeff with all sorts of questions: how was the swimming? did he ever sail? what was the name of that exotic shrub? But he had sunk into a morose mood and answered with grunts and monosyllables. He had not recouped his losses at cards. Lack of sleep and too much drink had left a red haze in his eyes, and his face looked puffy and pale.

Soon we turned onto a gravel driveway flanked by two stone pillars. "This is it," said Jeff, brightening a little.

I could not see the house. The trees, thick and entwined above us, hid it from view. The harsh sunlight did not penetrate here.

We stopped in front of an iron gate and I could look

straight up the path beyond to the irregular scrolled front of Wade House. It was much larger than I had imagined, sprawling across an untidy lawn, three stories high in some places, and in others, towers rose above that. It had dozens and dozens of windows, some tall and narrow, some arched, others wide and square. All had blank shades drawn against the light. There were bays and cupolas and a long porch. The house was painted in dull brown. The white trim did not relieve its heavy, ugly aspect, a relic of an outmoded era.

We ascended three stone steps and went through the iron gate, and even then I saw how the garden had an air of neglect about it. Underneath the towering eucalyptus and twisted pepper trees the ivy geranium ran in choking wildness, the yellow mustard vied with overgrown beds of marigold and alyssum. Mossy cobbled paths ran off into the shaded, dank undergrowth. Here and there a struggling rosebush had managed to survive the onslaught of verbena and strawberry begonia, its weak pink or yellow blossoms blooming palely.

A woman stepped from the shadowed porch and shielded her eyes. "Is that you, Jeff?" she called.

Jeff walked up the steps while I trailed behind him. "Yes, it's me, Mom." He stooped and kissed her absently on the cheek. Over his shoulders she peered at me with faded blue eyes. They were pink rimmed, giving them a rabbit-like look. Jeff's mother, like the garden, wore an air of neglect. Her hair, once blonde, was now a yellowed gray, pulled back in an untidy bun, one lock escaping over her ear. There was a puckered, uncertain aspect to her small white face. She wore a longish skirt of dark blue and a slightly soiled blue blouse. It had a button missing. Fleeting, I wondered if Jeff had exaggerated his family's wealth. Or was Mrs. Wade just one of those rich old women who dressed as she pleased because she could afford to be eccentric?

"This is Nancy," said Jeff, stepping aside. "She's the new Mrs. Jeffrey Wade."

Mrs. Wade's eyes blinked rapidly and a nervous smile darted across her face, leaving a tremor in her lower lip. "Who?" she asked in a light childish voice.

"Nancy. Her name is Nancy. And she's my wife," said Jeff loudly, impatiently, the way one speaks to the simple or the elderly deaf. "She's your new daughter-in-law."

Her hand fluttered out to me. I took it in my own and felt that it was hot, dry, fragile as bird bones. "It's . . . so nice to meet you . . ." I said haltingly. I couldn't bring myself to call her "Mother," and "Mrs. Wade" sounded too formal.

"Jeff didn't tell me. He didn't write. . . ." Her voice was an indecisive treble.

"There wasn't time," I said. "We meant to, but everything happened so quickly. And then we were on our way here, anyway."

"I knew Jeff was coming, but he didn't say——" she repeated.

"Nancy told you I didn't have time to explain," Jeff said. He was plainly annoyed.

The front door opened and a woman stood framed momentarily on the threshold. "Bella!" Jeff shouted and she flew into his outflung arms. They embraced warmly. She covered his face with kisses, while I stood watching with embarrassed uneasiness. Then she pushed him away holding him at arm's length. "Let me look at you," she exclaimed. "You handsome pilot! Oh, you're absolutely gorgeous!" She was a woman in her mid-forties, her figure just escaping plumpness; lush would be the best description of her, with her fleshy, rounded arms, and her ample bosom, which was set off provocatively by a low-cut peasant blouse. Her features were strong, her eyes bold, slightly almond-shaped under the blackest wavy hair I had ever seen. Two large loops of gold hung from her pierced ears. I wondered if she had any Indian or gypsy blood; there seemed to be a pulsating wild passion behind that dark face, passion barely held in check.

For a few minutes they talked rapidly at one another, ignoring Mrs. Wade and me. Finally Jeff said, "Bella, you haven't met Nancy." He pulled me next to him.

Mrs. Kingsley's eyebrows were questioning penciled arches, while the warmth fled from her eyes.

"And Nancy," said Jeff, "I want you to meet the greatest, the one and only, Mrs. Bella Kingsley."

Mrs. Kingsley said bluntly, "Who's she?"

Jeff laughed. "My wife, Bella. How's about that?"

I would have preferred a less flippant introduction, serious, more sober words to give me status, courage in the face of Mrs. Kingsley's icy stare.

"Your *what*?" she asked. The color had fled from her face leaving two red spots of rouge on her high cheekbones.

"I got hitched on my way out from Pensacola," said Jeff casually.

"You got hitched? Married?" She picked up the words as if they were dirty, unclean. "Where did you meet her?"

It was awful standing there and being referred to as "her" and "she" as if I were some inanimate object purchased at the market.

"We met at State University," Jeff said. Then he added, "She's a nice kld."

There was a silence while Mrs. Kingsley continued to stare. "You could at least have warned me," she said at last.

"Now, Bella, don't get all hot about it." He said it as if he were a small boy who had just done something naughty and knew that he could cajole his way out of a reprimand.

Mrs. Kingsley, tight-lipped, did not answer. Instead she turned her eyes upon me again. My body shrank under her naked appraisal. I was conscious of my wrinkled skirt, my scuffed shoes, my hair, which had become stringy on the long train ride. Why should I feel this uneasy shame? I asked myself. She's only the housekeeper. Yet, it was apparent from that first moment that it was she, not poor, doddering Mrs. Wade, who was head of the household.

"Oh, come on, Bella," Jeff broke in. "Let's not stand out here and argue. We're starved. What's for dinner?"

She went into the house and Jeff, taking my arm, propelled me through the glass-paned door. I do not think I shall ever forget that first sensation of entering Wade House. It was a cold place, shadowed, dark, sending a shivering chill along my arms. I can still smell the dank musty odor, so peculiar to old houses, a smell of decay and rot. I can still see the wide staircase branching into two at the first landing. There were two winged cupids, one at either side of the stairs. They rose from the newel posts, each holding a lamp in an upraised arm.

We did not go upstairs, but went immediately in to dinner. It was a strained affair, at least for me. Mrs. Kingsley and Jeff talked on and on, catching up on the year he had been away. They did not speak to Mrs. Wade or me. I tried to make conversation with my new mother-in-law, but she

merely smiled her quick nervous smile, and talk soon died on my lips.

The room we sat in was dreary in spite of its high ceiling and rotund bay windows. The furniture was heavy, oppressive. The round table had thick clawed legs intricately carved. The sideboard was massive, of dark stained wood. On the walls, paper of a dark, bilious green was imprinted with some kind of ivy pattern writhing up and down in meticulous rows.

"We can't get any help out here," Mrs. Kingsley was saying. "Nowadays a person doesn't even have to know how to read or write to get a job in a defense factory. I have this Mexican woman coming in once a week to help with the cleaning. Very uppity, too. Independent. But I have to put up with her. Seward putters around in the yard. As you can see, he doesn't do much good. It's a mess out there."

"Sure is," said Jeff. "By the way, where is old Cousin Seward?"

"He's gone to an air-raid warden meeting. Too old to get back into the service, besides having that trick knee. So he makes up for it by drilling and giving orders to a bunch of the other leftovers. He'll be here, eventually. We never wait dinner for him."

Mrs. Wade piped up. "Seward is as sweet as he can be. He's awfully good tempered, and *very* helpful. . . ."

"Just because he's an old beau of yours and has been hanging around for umpty-nine years doesn't give him a halo," said Mrs. Kingsley with faint derision. She got up and cleared our plates and carried them into the kitchen.

Mrs. Wade blinked her eyes, leaned over to Jeff and said, "I forgot to tell you something important."

"What is it, Mom?" he said, crunching on a leftover celery stick.

"Tony is back!" Her pale eyes brightened.

"Tony? Where'd he come from?"

"He's in the Navy, too. And he wears a lovely uniform just like you." Mrs. Wade fluttered her hands.

"I thought you said he came home," said Jeff.

"But he *did*. . . ."

Mrs. Kingsley entered carrying a large pie in one hand and a stack of dessert plates in the other.

"Mom is saying something about Tony. Claims he's in the Navy," Jeff said to Mrs. Kingsley.

"Didn't I mention it? He's over at the Air Station. Comes home several times a week." She began to cut the pie with firm decisive movements.

"He isn't flying, is he? Seems to me he'd be a little over age for that," Jeff said.

"No. He doesn't fly," said Mrs. Kingsley. "I think he's some kind of executive officer. You know Tony doesn't talk much. Never did. So I don't exactly know."

Mrs. Wade stuck her head forward and interposed, "Oh, it's so wonderful to have him home again. He's all grown up to be such a fine looking man. His father would be proud of him."

"Mom," said Jeff, "he's been grown up for a long time now."

"Yes, yes, but it's been so many years since he went away," she said in a trembling voice. "You were just a little boy and you don't remember."

"I saw him when he came home from school on vacations. I remember *that*." He made a wry face. I suspected that Jeff did not get along too well with his brother.

"He was such a *good* boy, too, so mannerly. He always pushed my chair in for me at dinner, fetching a clean handkerchief when I needed it. . . ." Her voice grew higher in pitch, more tremulous, yet more excited. "Tony, small as he was, he *understood* so much. I used to talk to him by the hour, tell him all about Lottie——"

"Ernestine!" Mrs. Kingsley interrupted sharply. "Don't go and get yourself all worked up about nothing. There's your pie." She passed the plate to Mrs. Wade. "Apple's your favorite."

"But Bella——" Mrs. Wade protested meekly.

"Never mind!" She stressed the words in a peculiar way. Whatever it meant, Mrs. Wade's pale face became even whiter, and she thrust her shaking hands under the table. Her mouth gave us a quick jerky smile, but there was a look of unmistakable fright in her eyes.

We were drinking our coffee in silence when we heard the front door open and close. A few minutes later a man of about sixty with cropped white hair and a neat white moustache entered the room. He paused briefly when he saw Jeff. "Why,

Jeff, I didn't know you were here." He came across the room, limping slightly, and shook Jeff's hand.

"You're looking great," said Jeff, "for an old man. Getting a lot of outdoor exercise?"

The man nodded. His face was sunburned, and I remembered thinking how healthy and strong he looked, despite his limp.

Jeff turned to me. "This is Cousin Seward, Seward Townsend. Nancy, my wife."

If Seward Townsend was surprised at Jeff's having a wife, he never showed it. His eyes, a deep ink-blue, smiled politely. "Glad to meet you," he murmured, as if he had just been introduced to some casual guest who had dropped in unexpectedly and who had been asked for dinner.

"Oh, Seward, have you been to town?" Mrs. Wade asked.

"Yes, Ernestine," he said in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. "And I brought you something."

A stained flush came to her face and she clasped her hands together. "What is it?"

He reached in his jacket pocket and brought out a small box wrapped in tissue paper. "Shall I open it for you, Ernestine? Or would you like to, yourself?"

"You open it, Seward. You know how my hands go all a-fumble."

He undid the gold string and slipped a small box out from the crackling tissue. He made a slight bow and handed her the box. After several attempts Mrs. Wade got the lid off and lifted a silver identification bracelet, the kind so popular during the war, from its nest of cotton. "Oh . . . oh . . ." Her eyes filled with tears. "That's so sweet of you, Seward. You are *such* a darling."

Mrs. Kingsley, who had watched in silence, the corners of her mouth turned down, spoke. "Nice. Better put it on before you lose it."

Mrs. Wade glanced indecisively at Mrs. Kingsley then back to Seward.

"Here, let me put it on for you, Ernestine," he said.

"Put it on her ankle," laughed Jeff. "That's where all the girls are wearing them."

Somehow, the statement embarrassed me. I looked down at my hands and saw the ring I had been married with, Jeff's class ring. It had been far too big for me, and I had wrapped

tape around the bulky insignia so that it would not slip off. Even so it was too big, and I had to keep turning it around to hide the ugly tape. I wondered if Jeff were going to buy me a proper wedding ring. Not that I wanted a diamond; a plain gold band would do nicely. But then a ring was a small matter, wasn't it? He had married me, and that was what was important.

We sat at the table for a long time after the meal was finished. I thought we'd never leave. I was bone weary, tired to my very soul, and there was an ache behind my eyes. Jeff was discussing with Mrs. Kingsley what bedroom should be ours. "Why can't you stay in your room tonight?" Mrs. Kingsley asked. "I can fix Nancy up in the little room at the end of the hall."

"No," I heard myself saying. "I wouldn't like that." Everybody looked at me, and I could feel my cheeks turning crimson with some obscure shame.

Jeff laughed. "You can't separate the bride from her loving bridegroom." And my discomfort increased when Seward and Mrs. Wade joined in the laughter.

Mrs. Kingsley didn't laugh. She sat for a few minutes with a drawn brow. Finally she said we could use Mrs. Wade's old room. "It's a bit dusty," she said. "Your mother sleeps downstairs now in what used to be the butler's room."

Mrs. Kingsley had not exaggerated about the dust. But more than that, the room had an unaired, close, moldering smell, as if it had sat there for years without a human presence or voice. Even the windows, opened to the night breeze, failed to dispel its aura of mustiness. There was a huge walnut carved bed and two stolid bureaus. A marble-topped dressing table held an old double-bowled Victorian lamp, several china shepherdesses, a pitcher, and a tray of rusty red design.

I'll fix it up, I thought. I'll get rid of those faded green velvet drapes and put chintz at the windows. I'll find a comfortable chair with a gay covering. I'll remove that hideous lamp and the impossible marble table, I'll. . . .

Mrs. Kingsley, who was deftly putting clean sheets on the bed, broke into my thoughts. "This room is exactly as it was when Mrs. Wade came here as a bride. Nothing's been changed. Mrs. Wade would be very upset if it were." No

changes. Mrs. Kingsley, not Mrs. Wade, would frown on changes. Had she read my thoughts?

I did not say anything. Already, I had begun to feel subdued, crushed by those black sloe eyes, the set of that square jaw.

After she had closed the door and gone, I put my arms around Jeff. He bent and kissed me. For a moment I forgot the strange loneliness that had smothered me all evening. I forgot about the old family circle at dinner, the gloomy bedroom. I was in Jeff's arms and I was secure. Then Jeff said, "Do you mind if I go out for a while? I want to check on some of my old pals. I know you're tired and won't want to come."

Of course, I said I didn't mind. I wasn't going to play the clinging monopolizing wife. He needn't give up his friends just because he was married. But deep inside I wanted him there with me my first night at Wade House. I was so far away from everything I knew, and so alone.

Weary as I was, I did not sleep. I tossed and turned, churning up the bedclothes, trying to find a comfortable relaxing spot. At each creak and groan of the old house, I held my breath, expecting that it was Jeff's step upon the stair. But he did not return until three in the morning. I was still awake, lying there silent, pretending to be asleep, when he finally slipped into bed beside me. He smelled of whiskey. A minute later he was sound asleep.

And that was my first night at Wade House.

THREE

The next morning when I awoke, Jeff had already gone. I dressed hurriedly, thinking I would catch him downstairs at breakfast. But when I descended the staircase and entered the dining room it was empty. I went through the dining room into the kitchen. Mrs. Kingsley was seated at a small table near the window smoking a cigarette and reading a magazine. She gave me an unfriendly look. "I—I wondered if Jeff were here," I said apologetically.

"He's gone over to the Air Station to report in," she said. "Didn't he tell you?"

"No . . . I mean . . . yes. He did mention it. But I'd forgotten," I lied. "I suppose he didn't want to wake me."

"Strange way to act for a man that's newly married." There was the faintest of sneers behind her voice.

"I expect he was late," I murmured, not knowing what else to say. Her dark eyes were hard. "Did he say when he'd be back?"

"No." She ground out her cigarette. "He'll come when he's good and ready, the way he usually does."

I stood there uncomfortably, twisting the ring on my finger. I could not understand why she should resent me so. "Mrs. Kingsley," I began tentatively, "I hope we can get along. I love Jeff and I want to make him happy. I want all his family and his friends to be mine, too. I know that none of you were prepared for his marriage, that it was a surprise, but I hope in time you will see that we didn't make a mistake." I ended in a rush, a little amazed at my own temerity.

"It was a shock, all right, there's no two ways about it."

"Yes, I know, and I don't blame you for not being overly pleased."

"Overly pleased? Jeff is one boy who can afford to wait, to pick and choose. I've known him since he was born. He's

handsome, he's clever." She broke off and shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, he's all of that. And don't think I don't appreciate how lucky I am."

She did not say anything, but sat watching me. She made it difficult to speak. But I wanted so for her, for everyone, to like me. I continued, "I—I heard you say yesterday that you were shorthanded. I'd be very glad to help around the house in any way I can. My mother ran a boarding house, and I've helped her when I could. Cooking . . . cleaning. . . ."

"Your mother ran a boarding house?" She said it as if it were something not quite decent.

"Yes. We owned the house." (As if *that* would give it more status in her eyes.) "There were girls from school, eight of them."

"And your father?"

"He works for a wholesale radio firm." I could not bring myself to say that father was a salesman on the road, and not a very successful one.

"I see," she said. Then, after a short pause, "I suppose Jeff told you that he was going with a girl before he met you."

"Yes, I know. Terry."

"Terry? No," she frowned. "Her name was Susan. Susan Gillespie. One of the San Francisco Gillespies. An old family. Very wealthy. They had a summer home on the Point. Used to come down here every season."

I nodded dumbly.

"She's a lively girl, strong, healthy, full of go. Lots of important connections. That helps, you know."

What could I say? I was none of those things.

"You may be a nice girl, Nancy," she said, throwing the word "nice" out like a sop, "but you and Jeff are very different. I hate to say this, but I doubt if it will work."

"I—I hope you're wrong, Mrs. Kingsley," I said weakly.

She shrugged her shoulders. "What's done is done. There's no use crying about it now." I knew that she meant Jeff's marrying me. "There's coffee and scrambled eggs on the stove," she said closing the subject.

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry." Suddenly, I could not bear to be alone with her another minute.

I walked out to the porch. The sun was shining through the trees and somewhere a mockingbird called in full-throated

melody. Its song hardly reached me. My heart was like a lump of clay inside me; heavy, inert. Why should Mrs. Kingsley care that Jeff had married a boarding-house Davenport, instead of a rich, influential Gillespie? She wasn't his mother. What if she *had* known Jeff since childhood? Did that give her the right to bludgeon me with her snobbishness? At least my real mother-in-law didn't seem to care.

I stepped onto the lawn and from there wandered down one of the mossy paths that led through the trees. I found a small empty pool. It must have held fish at one time, gold and silvery, flashing in and out among lily pads. Now a cracked, weathered statue of a winged Mercury stood in the center of the leaf-choked basin. The grass around the pool grew thick and unkempt.

I continued my walk and soon came to a gate on the edge of the cliff. Like the front gate it was iron grille, but this one was closed with a rusty padlock. I looked through the grille and saw that a series of rotted wooden steps led down to a tiny cove. Beyond it the ocean spread its smooth blue surface to the sky. I tried the lock, and surprisingly it came apart in my hands.

I picked my way carefully down the crumbling stairs. The tide was out, and the smell of stranded kelp was strong, a salty, iodine smell, not at all unpleasant. The cove was sheltered from the rough surf by an outcropping of rocks that thrust an arm halfway around it. Here, on the little beach, the sea wind was gentle. I took off my shoes and splashed about the tide pools exploring the fascinating myriad life left stranded by the outgoing water. The sun warmed my shoulders and I forgot about Mrs. Kingsley and her cold reproof.

I sat upon the hot sand, clasping my knees, gazing at the combers as they hit the rimmed rock. Jeff and I would have a picnic here, I thought. We'd bring chicken sandwiches, potato salad, cold beer. Together we'd scramble among the rocks looking for shells and odd-shaped pebbles. We would swim. . . .

Suddenly I had the strange feeling that I was being watched. It was a queer sensation, for I was all alone on the beach. And yet it persisted, a subtle rising of the hairs on the back of my neck. I turned around. No one was there. Then, above the sound of the waves, I thought I heard my name

called. "Nanceeee! Nanceeee!" It was a weird, windborne sound. I craned my neck up at the cliff, and caught a glimpse of a dark blue skirt. I went to the foot of the stairs and there halfway down was Mrs. Wade. She was beckoning wildly to me.

When I reached her she grasped my hand. It had a clawing, desperate strength in it, I would not have thought possible. "Nancy," she whispered. "You mustn't." Her eyes darted past me, frightened eyes.

"I mustn't what?" I asked.

"You mustn't go down there. That's a terrible place." She dragged at my arm. "Please," she implored.

"Why not? What's wrong with the cove?"

"No! You don't understand."

I yielded to her frantic pull and together we climbed to the top. "Don't ever go there," she said, still holding on to me.

"It seems safe enough," I said. Why should she be afraid of the cove? Was she worried that I would be caught by the incoming tide?

"No," she shook her head violently, "it's *not* safe. You just don't know. . . ." She was trembling now.

We started on the path back to the house and met Seward limping toward us. "Ernestine," he said, "where have you been? I've been looking all over for you. You promised me a game of checkers."

"I followed Nancy. Seward, she was down *there*, down in that horrible place where—" She clapped her hand to her mouth.

Seward put his arm around her. "Come now, Ernestine, it's all right. Let's go back to the house and you can lie down for a while." His voice was gentle and soothing.

"But Nancy was down there!"

All the way back to the house he spoke to her in soft comforting tones as if she were a child who had had a bad scare. "After you've had your rest, we'll go for a ride," he promised.

"I'd like that, Seward. That would be fun," she said.

I sat down on the porch steps and waited until Seward had taken Ernestine to her room. I thought that he would come back outside and give me some sort of explanation for her odd behavior. After an interval when he didn't come, I

went looking for him. I found him in the room that was known as the study, sunk in a large chair staring moodily into the empty, cold fireplace.

"How is she?" I asked.

"She'll be all right. Doesn't take much to upset her," he said.

"Why is she so afraid of the cove? If I had been swimming, I could understand. But I was just sitting there on the beach."

He looked at me out of his blue eyes, eyes deep with hidden pain. "Ernestine's daughter was drowned in that cove. She was only two years old, hardly more than a baby. It was a tragedy. Ernestine's never gotten over it."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

There was a slight hesitant pause before he answered. "Lottie wandered off. . . . Ernestine blamed herself."

I thought of the padlocked gate and the long flight of stairs. "Wasn't the gate kept locked in those days?"

He gave me a sharp look. "Yes . . . yes . . . it was. But Ernestine, the nurse, and Lottie had gone to the cove. The nurse went back up to the house to get something, a bathing hat, a towel. Ernestine was collecting shells among the rocks. When she looked around Lottie was gone."

"How awful," I said.

"Yes. They never found her body. The current runs deep sometimes."

"Poor Mrs. Wade," I said. "No wonder. . . ."

"No wonder *what*?" There was an edge to his voice that made me uncomfortable, as if I had been prying into something that was none of my business.

"No wonder she's so—so afraid of that beach."

He did not answer but went back to staring into the fireplace. I could tell that it was an unhappy subject and that he would rather not discuss it.

The next day, after Jeff had gone, I decided to fill the time until evening when he would return by exploring the house. There were so many rooms, dust-sheeted, darkened by lowered blinds. Brocaded flowery drapes, tasseled bedspreads, domed glass lamps, cupids, bric-a-brac were all festooned with cobwebs and covered with dust. It made me wonder how Mrs. Kingsley's Mexican cleaning lady spent her time.

Downstairs there was one huge room, which I imagined might have been the main, or grand drawing room. Its furniture was also covered in dust sheets, but I could make out the shape of a piano, sofas, chairs. Over the mantel was a portrait of a man with a beautifully modeled nose and square chin. His face was dark, almost swarthy. He was posed in a business suit of old-fashioned cut, sitting at a desk. His frank smile was familiar, and the eyes had the sort of devilish twinkle I had often seen in Jeff's. A small gold plaque at the bottom of the frame said "Alexander Wade, 1888-1921." Jeff's father. He had died young, only thirty-three years old. I wondered whether there would be dust sheets in this room and the others if he had lived. Had the absence of that smile and twinkle been responsible for the pall that now hung over Wade House?

I soon grew depressingly weary of poking about in airless cupolas and bedrooms smelling of a dead past. In the afternoon I went out into the garden with a book. I discovered an old wicker chair and sat there trying to catch the sun, which slanted down through the trees.

There was a fragrance in the garden, mimosa and mock orange mingled with roses. A bee hummed and droned in a straggly daisy bed. Soon my eyes became heavy, the book dropped into my lap.

I came to with the wind blowing fresh and strong through the trees. A man in Navy Air Force greens was opening the iron gate. "Jeff . . ." The name died on my lips. It wasn't Jeff. This man was taller, slimmer, although his dark hair and skin were the same. He came down the garden walk toward me. I do not know why my heart did a queer little skipping beat. Perhaps it was just that I had met so many strange people in the past week, and I, who was never very poised at meeting new people, involuntarily shied away from facing yet another. Or perhaps it was some subconscious premonition about the approaching figure, the determined stride, the arrogant poise, which made me shrink.

Then he was standing over me, his face resembling Jeff's, but with a thinness, a brooding quality to his features, that was totally different. Even before he spoke I knew that it was Jeff's brother, Tony.

"Who're you?" he asked bluntly.

"Nancy," I replied with inane obedience.

"Nancy? Nancy who?"

Suddenly I was tired of apologizing for my existence. I mentally straightened my spine and shoulders and added in a voice that was a little too loud, "I'm the new Mrs. Jeffrey Wade."

He stuck his hands in his pockets and cocked his head. His eyes were bold, appraising, taking in my schoolgirl skirt and blouse, my saddle shoes and bobby socks. "Jeff married?"

Why did everybody think it so preposterous for Jeff to marry? Or was it that he had married *me*?

"Yes," I answered stiffly.

"Congratulations!" He gave a little mock bow.

"Thank you," I said.

Then with a swift motion he bent down and scooped the book from my lap. "My God!" He pushed his billed cap back on his head. "Edna St. Vincent Millay! *I only know that summer sang in me. . . .*"

I leapt to my feet and snatched the book from his hands.

"Poetry," he said. "Romantic love poetry."

"And what's wrong with that?" I could feel the hot blood spreading up through my hair line.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Wherever did Jeff find *you*?"

I did not know whether to be flattered or insulted. "We met at school," I said.

"Seems to me you ought to be there now."

"Why? I'm old enough to be married." And then answering his look of disbelief I added, "I'll be twenty-one in two months." It seemed strange to me later on reflection that Tony's rude bluntness could anger me to quick response, whereas Mrs. Kingsley's attitude crushed me to mute silence.

"A very matronly age," he said. "But I can't imagine Jeff being even remotely interested in girls who read poetry."

"And why not? What sort of girl would you expect?"

"Some painted floozie with a pinchable bottom whom he picked up in a bar."

"You underestimate your brother."

"Oh, so you guessed he was my brother?"

"It wasn't hard. You look very much like him."

"Worse luck," he said.

His eyes, now serious, studied me for a moment. "Tell me," he said at last, "why did you marry that oaf?"

His direct question stung me. "None of your business," I said.

"For his money?" he persisted.

"What money?"

"Come on, now. Jeff never loses a second to brag about the fortune he's going to get when he hits twenty-five. Those Wade millions."

"Wade millions? I didn't realize that you were all so rich." I gestured at the unkempt garden.

"Not *all*. Mostly Jeff. I'm the poor relative. You picked the right Wade when you married him."

"I suppose it would be useless to tell you that I married him because I love him."

There was a sardonic twitch to his smile. "Love? Jeff's not a very lovable fellow, if I remember correctly."

"I think he is. And so does Mrs. Kingsley."

"Bella? Oh, *her*. She's always acted like the sun rises, goes around, and sets on little Jeffie. Spoiled him rotten. I think she's a little in love with him, myself."

A small trickle of uneasiness seeped into my heart. I remembered how passionately Mrs. Kingsley had embraced Jeff on the porch when she had greeted him. How her eyes had followed his every move, how she had hovered over him at the dinner table chatting and laughing with him, how she had suggested that I sleep in another room. I shook my head. It wasn't right to have such thoughts. It was unnatural. After all, she was old enough to be his mother.

FOUR

Three nights later Jeff told me he was taking me to a party. It was to be a get-together of the men in his outfit, their wives and girls. I dressed with special care, remembering to brush my hair over my ears, to apply my lipstick with precision. I wanted Jeff to be proud of me. I wanted people to say, "What a charming wife you have." Most of all I wanted to erase the cold disapproval of Mrs. Kingsley and Tony's mocking, secret smile.

"Haven't you got something better than that to wear?" asked Jeff as I slipped on my red dress, the very one I had worn when I had first met him.

"No . . . I . . . it's . . . I haven't." I was mortified. He hadn't even noticed, hadn't remembered. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's not classy or sexy enough," he said. "You ought to get Seward to take you into town. Get yourself something new, something with more zip in it. We're not at State University with all those Midwestern yokels, anymore. Some of the top gold braid are going to be there. My wing commander, too. His wife is a Bryn Mawr girl."

"I didn't know. . . ." I said apologetically. He had made it sound like a high echelon diplomatic affair. "If you had told me sooner. . . ." I hadn't known anything about the party until dinner time. In fact, I hadn't even seen too much of Jeff in the past few days.

"Well, come on," he said. "We're late now."

Jeff had managed to buy a rattley Buick coupe. It was a convertible, though, and he insisted on leaving the top down, although the night air was cold and windy. By the time we arrived at our destination, I knew my hair was a mess. My eyes were reddened too, not only by the wind, but by unshed tears, for Jeff hadn't said a word to me all through the drive.

"Are you sorry that you married me?" I had asked timorously, at one point.

"Aw, please, don't start on that. Not now," he had answered in annoyance.

The party was held in a small nightclub, which had been taken over completely by the squadron for the occasion. Hula House, I believe it was called. The outside was flanked by two mangy palms struggling up from wooden tubs. A sign above the door, unlighted because of the blackout, outlined a sinuous, lei-entwined hula dancer. Once we opened the door and stepped inside through a minute, velvet-lined foyer we were swamped by a tide of raucous drum-tattooing music, noisy laughter, billows of cigarette smoke. We had to elbow our way through the mob of frenzied merrymakers. From Jeff's previous comments it was hardly the type of party I expected. "Come on, Nancy," Jeff urged. "Let's go up to the bar and have a drink." I hung on to his arm, but a rollicking couple crashed through and we were separated. "Jeff, I called. "Jeff, wait!" I saw his head bobbing in the crowd and then he was gone.

I stood there, jostled, pushed, and stepped on, alone and bewildered. It was so like the countless parties I had been to, where I had stood apart watching the others from an agonizing distance. People, happy, laughing, festive, dancing around me, as if I were a quarantined island. But I wasn't *that* Nancy, anymore, I told myself. I was married to Jeff Wade. At this moment he would be looking for me, asking anxiously, "Have you seen my wife? She was wearing a red dress."

Someone thrust a drink into my hand. It was a little red-headed ensign with a thin moustache, his hat riding on the back of his head. "Drink up, honey," he said. "Don't you know there's a war on?" And then, he, too, was swept up by the crowd. Balancing the frigid drink in one hand, I wormed my way through to a table along the wall. I found a chair and sat down. The walls were covered with murals depicting life in the South Seas. Not the bloody, embattled South Seas, but idyllic scenes of brown-skinned Polyne-sians, almond-eyed, swimming in deep green lagoons, fishing in white-combed seas, dancing in frozen sensuousness upon white, palm-draped beaches. Sipping my drink, I

feigned bored indifference while my eyes searched anxiously for the sight of Jeff.

"Dance, honey?" It was the little redheaded ensign. Before I could reply he had snatched my hand, and we were on the floor among the crushing throng. "Swing" was the dance of the moment, and my partner was not one to be out of fashion—even if the tempo of the music was inappropriate. I was flung about, twirled, and thrown to some inner tempo of his own choosing. Finally, murmuring a breathless "Thanks," he deposited me at the same table and skipped off to another more pliant partner.

I drained my drink. But it did nothing for me. My agonized eyes searched the dancers for the familiar dark head and face of Jeff. I did see him once drifting by with a golden-headed girl in his arms. He held her tight, his face close to hers, his eyes half closed. I rose from my seat, his name an inarticulate, frozen thing on my lips. But no sound came from them. Pride forbade it. I would not, could not, make myself the jealous wife. He would find me, come to me, in good time.

"Having fun?" a voice asked. I looked up and there was Tony, smiling his mocking, twisted smile.

"Yes, lots of fun," I lied. He was the last person I wanted to see. "What are you doing here? Are you in the same outfit as Jeff?"

"No. I just crashed," he said. "A party's a party. Where's Jeff?"

"He's around," I said airily.

He sat down next to me. "Hasn't found himself a blonde, has he?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Because he's married doesn't mean he has to dance with me all evening, does it?"

"No," he answered solemnly. "But he's having some ball with the wing commander's wife."

"She's a Bryn Mawr girl," I said, as if that explained everything.

"Is that so?" His eyes searched my face. I freshened my smile, hoping it would mask my inward misery. "Well, you'd better rescue him," he added, "before he becomes a Bryn Mawr boy. You'll probably find him near the band under one of the potted palms."

After Tony left, I swallowed my pride and went in search

of Jeff. He *was* under the potted palm, and the Bryn Mawr girl, very gilded, very pretty, was on his lap. A red haze seemed to float before my eyes, seeing them there, the two of them in such intimacy. I didn't care anymore about not being the jealous wife. "Jeff, I want to go home!" I shouted above the musical din. "Now!"

The girl looked up at me quizzically. "Who's she?"

"My wife," said Jeff.

She slid from his lap. "Better run along, then," she said, and with a twist of her hips sauntered off.

"What'd you have to do that for?" he said in a thickened tone. His eyes were bloodshot; he was drunk already. "She'll probably never speak to me again."

"As if I care," I said. "I haven't seen you all evening. Where have you been?"

"Having fun. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Except that I'd like to have some fun, too."

"Well, why don't you then? There's plenty of other people here."

"But I came with *you*. You could at least acknowledge my existence. Not act like I was a total stranger. You could ——" I was wound up and didn't care what I said.

"Oh, for God's sake. Let's not have a fight right out here in public. Let's go home."

This time, on the drive home, I cried openly. It was our first quarrel. Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut? Jeff wasn't doing anything, really. He was just entering into the spirit of the party. The girl had probably been tipsy and plunked herself down on his lap. And he couldn't have very well thrown her off without being rude, could he? Jeff drove in silence, his profile carved of stone.

When we got home and entered the vestibule, Mrs. Kingsley was standing there. I knew that she had been waiting up for us. "Have a nice time?" she asked. Her black eyes took in my tear-reddened eyes and Jeff's hard, angry expression.

"Yes," I murmured, trying, but not succeeding, to avoid her eyes.

Jeff, without answering, had started to climb the stairs. I followed him, but not before I had seen the look of triumphant gloating in the twist of her mouth. A sharp knife of fear rammed through my heart. "I doubt if it will work," she

had said. She had seen that we had been quarreling, and she was pleased.

Once in our room with the door shut, Jeff sat down on the bed and started to take off his shoes. I knelt down in front of him and took his hands in mine. "Please don't be angry with me," I said. "I know I behaved like a dolt. I won't ever do it again."

He yawned, then he leaned over and kissed me. "S'al-right, Nancy." And so we made it up, and he was the same ardent Jeff I had known when we were first married.

That night, lying there in the dark, I promised myself that I would be a good wife, that I would never doubt Jeff, that I would never give way to jealousy again. He was just caught up in the wartime hysteria of living every moment as if it were his last. When this was over, life would be different. We would really be together then, doing things that ordinary married couples did. We would live somewhere else, not at Wade House. An apartment, at first, light and airy, with the walls a creamy white, a few good pieces, a floral sofa, a comfortable chair for Jeff. We would have children, two boys, two girls. The future was a bright, unwinding, promising road.

I carried my euphoria all through the next two weeks, even smiling at Mrs. Kingsley, unmindful of her snide reference to our coming home early from the party. Several times I paused briefly in the study, watching Mrs. Wade and Seward as they bent over a game of checkers. Mrs. Wade's small face puckered with seriousness, Seward cheating himself outrageously so that she could win. I would go in the warm sunlight and walk along the mossy paths, entranced at the sight of a hummingbird whirring minutely, dipping his nervous, long beak into a fading rose. I would pick sprays of pink geranium or little sprigs of wild mint. Sometimes I gathered sweet juicy peaches from a few neglected trees that had managed to survive and still bear fruit. I never went to the cove.

One day on one of those walks I sat down in a grassy clearing, took off my shoes, then stretched myself on the sweet-smelling clover. It was here Tony found me. "Hi!" he said, throwing himself down beside me. "I thought I saw you coming this way."

"Oh, hello," I said without warmth. Somehow I wanted

to be by myself, without the strain of having to make conversation, without the necessity of sparring verbally, being on guard. Then, I suddenly thought, why should I be on guard with Tony? That was foolish.

"Isn't it a perfect day?" I asked, to make up for my chilly greeting.

"Great," he answered. Then, "And how do you like Wade House, now that you've been here a little while?"

"It's a big place," I answered evasively. I couldn't very well tell him that I found his home ugly, cold, gloomy. "I've looked through some of the rooms, but I'm afraid I haven't seen the whole of it yet."

"Hasn't Jeff taken you on a guided tour?"

"No. He's been so busy."

"Then, I'll have to do it for him one of these days." He gave me a faint smile, his bantering eyes flicking my bare feet. Unaccountably, I tucked them under me.

"Has Wade House always been in the family?" I asked.

"The house was built by my grandfather. He came from Delaware originally. Made his money in shipping up around San Francisco. But he wasn't socially accepted there by the big moneyed families—there's some story of a snub—not being asked to join a certain club." He pulled a blade of grass and chewed on it. "Funny old coot. I remember him vaguely. A big man, handsome, had black hair up into his eighties. Maybe he dyed it. He was vain, too. All of us Wades are handsome and vain." He shot me an amused look.

"Is that why he built such an enormous place—twenty-two rooms, I think, Jeff said—his vanity?"

"I suppose. In those days, as always, a man's status was very much determined by the house he lived in. The Victorian folderol was a real expression of affluence. Still poor grandpop lost all his money in a couple of bad investments just before he died."

"But you told me——"

"That Jeff would inherit several millions? Yes. My father was smart enough to marry my mother. Her family had money. He got a loan from them, invested it in Mexican oil, and was lucky enough to sell six months before the Mexican government expropriated American interests." He tossed the blade of grass from him. "Money is a strange thing," he

said. He did not elaborate. We were silent for a few minutes, watching two swallows quarreling above us.

"You left that squadron party early," he said finally.

"Yes . . . I . . . I had a headache." I bent over and casually picked a morning glory. I didn't want to discuss the party.

"Find Jeff under the potted palm, all right?"

"Why . . . yes." I twisted the morning glory in my hands until it became a wet, tattered fragment.

"With the blonde?"

I didn't answer. What business was it of his?

"He didn't just meet Miss Bryn Mawr of 1942 at the party, you know," he went on in that exasperating manner of his.

"I suppose not." There was studied casualness to my words. "She's his squadron leader's wife, I understand."

"She's more than that," he went on in a relentless tone. I didn't want to hear anymore. I told myself to get up, leave him, take the path back into the house. But another part of me, some masochistic compulsion kept me rooted to the ground. "He's been seeing her all week. Ran into both of them at dinner the other night at the Blue Note. Very lovey dovey, they were."

A sick anger shook me and I threw the shredded morning glory into the grass. "I don't believe you," I said, jumping to my feet. "You're a liar. You're trying to make trouble between Jeff and me."

He smiled, that sardonic cruel smile, and shrugged his shoulders. "You really are naïve," he said.

I turned my back and fled into the house. I pounded up the stairs, slammed the door of my room, and flung myself upon the bed. Why did Tony have to tell me such a story? Why? Of course, I didn't believe him. Jeff was my husband, I loved him. But did he love me? a tiny voice asked. He did, he did, I answered. Hadn't he told me that he needed me, that I was the only girl who had ever understood him? But had he ever *said* he loved me? I banged my fists on the coverlet. No, I wasn't going to be a ninny. Some men just couldn't express themselves romantically, that was all.

I got up and began to pace the floor. My wild thoughts were like a beating pulse in my brain. And then I did something I never thought I was capable of. I went through the pockets

of Jeff's uniforms. I loathed myself for doing it, and yet loathing did not stay my searching hands. I found the letter I was looking for. "Darling Jeff," it began. The lavender scrap of paper swam before my eyes. With an effort I read on.

"Last night was wonderful. When can I see you again? Stu will be away this Tuesday. How about meeting me in the Blue Note around eight? Your honey, love and kisses."

I crumpled the note into a tight ball. So that was where he was tonight, Tuesday night. "I have to stay on for duty this evening," he had said when he left after breakfast. "Don't wait up for me."

All those nights he had told me he "had duty," the night when I had lain wide-eyed on the bed watching the patterns on the ceiling waiting for the telltale lights of his car. The nights when he had come home at midnight, three, four in the morning after having "a few drinks with the fellows," had he been with *her*?

No, I wouldn't believe it. But the balled-up note in my hand was like a living, red-hot coal.

FIVE

I never mentioned the note to Jeff. I could not face his cold, implacable anger, which I was sure would be his reaction, when he had found I had gone through his pockets. Instead I kept the knowledge to myself, where it chafed like a fevered, painful sore. It was an agony to go about with an artificial smile on my face, to sit across the oval table three times a day with Ernestine and Seward, making simple conversation, to feel Mrs. Kingsley's penetrating hostile eyes upon me. The evenings were the worst. Tony would watch me then—his eyes no longer amused, but brooding and sometimes direct.

Jeff was rarely home now. And as the days slipped by, I became more certain that he no longer cared for me if he had ever cared in the first place.

One gray foggy day, after a fit of terrible weeping, I decided that I could no longer go on with my moping and self-pity. I had to get out of that dreary house, be among people, get my mind off the incessant nagging voice of my discontent. The defense industries were begging for workers. I could get a job. I was a fair typist. I wouldn't mind working on the assembly line, anything.

When I broached the idea of my going to work Jeff was surprisingly encouraging. "Good idea," he said. "Not that we need the money. But it might get you out of the dumps. You've been looking kind of seedy lately."

"I didn't know you noticed," I said, stung by his remark.

"What do you mean by that?" It was one of the few evenings he was at home, and he was sprawled on the bed with a magazine, and a drink on the side table.

"I mean, you're hardly ever here to notice anything," I answered, allowing myself the luxury of a reproach.

"I can't help it if my country needs me. There's a war on, in case you didn't know."

Where, I wanted to ask, at the Blue Note? But I held my tongue and let it pass.

The next morning after breakfast I asked Seward if he would drive me to the bus. "Going into town?" he wanted to know.

I told him that I was going to look for a job. "I have to go in to San Diego, anyway," he said. "I'll take you."

We climbed into the old Cadillac that Seward kept polished and gleaming. "Uses gas like the devil. What with gas rationing and all, I don't take it out much."

"It's a beautiful car," I said.

He gave me a broad smile, his wind-burned face breaking into a dozen wrinkles. "She is a darling, isn't she? Bought it with my last dime. Dirt cheap, too. Some Marine going overseas."

So Seward wasn't one of the rich Wades either. We glided down the gravel driveway turning onto the street, Seward handling the car with loving care.

"Are you *Mrs. Wade's* cousin?" I asked, breaking a long silence.

"Second cousin," he answered. "I grew up with Ernestine. Exquisite creature, when she was young. Perfect skin, silky long yellow hair." He spoke with a wistful reverence. "She had the most perfect figure, too, with the tiniest waist. Rode horseback like a professional. You wouldn't believe it, but she was good at hunting, too. I taught her to use a rifle. Would have married her myself, if we weren't cousins. But then, Alec beat me to it anyway."

I tried to think of the faded, fluttery *Mrs. Wade* as young and exquisite. It was hard to picture her as lithe with the "tiniest waist" astride a fleet horse.

"The years have certainly been hard on her." Seward shook his head sadly.

"Has she always been so . . . so"—he threw me a sharp look—"so nervous?" I ended lamely.

"She's always been delicate. Needed someone to look after her. She's a fine-bred girl. Like a long-legged, excitable race horse, I'd say."

"Yes," I murmured. "She does seem jumpy, especially when *Mrs. Kingsley's* around."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, I don't know. But she seems *afraid* of *Mrs. Kingsley*."

There was a fraction of a pause, and then he said, "Nonsense. Why should she be?"

"I don't know," I said, remembering Ernestine Wade's pale eyes darting from Mrs. Kingsley's face to mine and back again.

"Mrs. Kingsley has a forcible personality. She's apt to make most anybody quiver. She doesn't mean any harm. She's been with Ernestine a long time, stuck with her through many a bad moment. And in her own way she's been good to her."

I didn't know what Seward meant by that last statement. It seemed to me that Mrs. Kingsley's attitude toward Mrs. Wade was overbearing, almost cruel. But I did not press the point. Instead I said, "You're fond of Mrs. Wade, aren't you?"

"More than fond." His face was serious. There was a long pause. "I always was. She was a bright thing once . . . not like she is now. Bright and pretty. If it weren't for me . . . well . . . she'd be like other women."

"What do you mean?"

"There was an accident. I was responsible."

"Lottie?"

"No. Long before that. It happened when she was fifteen. We were always together in those days. Her father had a big estate in Maryland. We lived about a mile away. We used to ride together every minute we could. We were both crazy about horses. Well, one day we were racing across a field. She looked so beautiful, her blonde hair streaming in the wind, her face laughing. We were going fast, but I put out my hand, just to touch her. Her horse bolted. She was thrown, and her head hit a rock." Seward's knuckles showed white as he gripped the steering wheel. "She was unconscious for days. When they got her around again, the doctor said that she'd never be the same . . . mentally. Her father took her all over the country, even to Europe, seeing one specialist after another. It didn't do any good." His voice was bitter.

"You mustn't blame yourself too much," I said. "It could have happened, anyway, under different circumstances."

He shook his head. "But it didn't. It was my fault."

There wasn't anything I could say to that, and we drove the rest of the way in silence.

Seward let me off in front of Consolidated Aircraft, under the shaded net of camouflage that had been erected for

miles over the plant. We agreed to meet at one o'clock that afternoon on the same spot. By then I should have canvassed the several places where employment would be available.

I found the personnel office without difficulty. There were great long lines in front of the windows, but they moved quickly enough. I was given an application to fill out, and had to wait for ten minutes before there was a vacant seat at a rough table pushed up against the wall. The room was hot, stuffy, filled with people, mostly women, young, old, fat, thin. Soon, tiny points of pain began to jab at my eyes, and there was a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

After waiting in line again, for what seemed hours, I was interviewed by a nasal, elderly woman. There was a job open as supply clerk. "Are you interested?" she asked, peering at me.

"Oh, yes. I am," I assured her.

"Be here at seven-thirty tomorrow morning then." She stamped a card and pushed it into my hand.

Once out on the street, I took a deep breath. I hadn't had any breakfast, except a cup of coffee. There was still an hour and a half before I was to meet Seward.

I took a bus uptown. Though it was forenoon, the bus, like the streets, was crowded with people; workers with lunch pails, soldiers, sailors, Marines. The bars and the movies we passed were open, with a steady stream of servicemen going in and out. I found a coffee shop in the Patterson Hotel and ordered a tuna sandwich and a cup of coffee. After the waitress had put it down in front of me, I discovered that I wasn't hungry after all. I sat there nibbling one of the soggy potato chips, watching the people come and go through the glass door that led into the lobby. My having a job, I thought, would be good medicine for me. I'd have regular hours, meet new people, be engrossed in something other than myself. There would be the problem of transportation. Jeff could bring me down every morning, since he left early, and maybe Seward could pick me up at the bus stop every night.

I forced myself to take a bite of sandwich and then another. It was like pencil shavings in my mouth. Looking up from the table, I suddenly saw a familiar figure in the hotel lobby. It was the short full form of Mrs. Kingsley. She was standing at the hotel desk holding hands with a huge, burly

sailor. He was bent over the desk writing, and Mrs. Kingsley was looking up at him and laughing. I could see the white flash of her teeth and the bobbing of her gold earrings. The clerk handed them a key and they disappeared from view.

The morsel of sandwich and the soggy potato chip churned in my stomach. I didn't really know why. Mrs. Kingsley's private life, her private appetites, were no concern of mine. Yet there was something shabby and sordid about the scene I had just witnessed and all its implications. I could not think of her as Jeff's "second mother," of her embracing him, without a shameful loathing.

On our way home I said nothing to Seward about my seeing Mrs. Kingsley. But it was hard to keep from asking about her. "Has Mrs. Kingsley been with the Wades for a long time?" I wanted to know.

"Since before Jeff was born," he said.

"She must have been very young then," I said.

"Yes, I suppose she was."

"And pretty," I added.

"Yes. I saw her only occasionally when I visited Wade House. I've only been living there these past ten years, since my retirement from the Army."

"What happened to Mr. Kingsley?"

"I have no idea," he said. There was something constrained about his manner, as if the subject of Mrs. Kingsley was distasteful.

"I'm afraid she doesn't like me," I offered.

He was thoughtful a minute. "I don't think she'd like anyone," he said. He gave a short smile. "Not anyone, I mean, who married Jeff. She'd be jealous, you know."

It was a new experience—another woman being jealous of me because of a man. But somehow it didn't make me feel any better.

The next morning I got up with Jeff when the alarm went off. My head was swimming and there was a terrible sick nausea under my heart. I forced myself to dress, thinking that if I had some breakfast I would feel better. But when I got downstairs and Mrs. Kingsley placed a platter of scrambled eggs in front of me, the steaming odor, the yellow mess speckled with little bits of white brought the taste of bile into my mouth. I hurriedly excused myself, and under the

astonished eyes of Jeff and the cold stare of Mrs. Kingsley ran from the room.

After I was violently ill, all I could manage was to crawl back into bed. Jeff came up after a while to get his hat before he left. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Upset stomach," I answered. "I had a tuna sandwich yesterday."

"I hope that's all it is," he said as he left. What had he meant by that? Surely he didn't think. . . .

There was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" I called. "Mrs. Kingsley."

"Just a minute." I didn't want her to find me in bed. She would consider it a weakness, a further mark of my not being healthy and strong.

I got up and smoothed out my dress and hair with shaking hands and opened the door. She brushed past me into the room. "What's the trouble?" she asked.

"Nothing. I ate in town yesterday and it didn't agree with me."

She ran her eyes over my figure. "Have you been sick like this every morning?"

"No. No, why should I be?" I didn't like the direction her questions were taking.

"Because I think you're pregnant," she said.

"No. No, that's not possible."

"Why not?" Her eyes had taken on an unpleasant, almost avid curiosity.

"Because . . . because . . ." My face reddened under her stare.

"Because?" she urged.

"It's too soon," I answered stupidly, when the real answer was "Because I don't want to be."

She laughed, a dry mirthless laugh. "For an educated girl you're not very smart. You'd better see a doctor and make sure. I'll call Dr. Davis and have him give you an appointment."

If I thought she was being momentarily sympathetic, kind, I was wrong. For as she was going out the door she turned and said, "Don't think having a baby is going to hold, or trap, Jeff. It won't."

The doctor was a harried elderly man. I suppose if he had

been less pressed, if his waiting room had not been packed to overflowing with patients, he would have noticed my worried apprehension. For all his brusqueness, I could see that underneath he was a kindly man, one of those old-fashioned fatherly general practitioners who in ordinary times, when he was not carrying the load of a younger partner who had gone into the service, would have sat me down in a deep leather chair and spoken to me reassuringly, calmly. As it was, he gave me a hurried examination, told me that he couldn't be sure of my condition. "Come back in six weeks," he said. "We can tell by then."

Six weeks! Not knowing for six weeks, with Mrs. Kingsley's black scornful eyes upon me, with Jeff growing more impatient and cold! "I can't wait," I blurted. "I've got to be certain, one way or the other." What difference it would make if I knew wasn't clear to me.

Dr. Davis gave me a questioning look. "It's just that my husband will be going overseas soon . . . and I have to make plans." I said.

"There's a lab test. You could have the results in twenty-four hours." He wrote out something on a slip of paper. "I'll give them a call and tell them you're coming." He handed me the slip of paper.

"Thank you," I said, staring down at the paper as if it contained the answer to some terrible dilemma.

And then, as an afterthought, Dr. Davis added, "Don't worry about it, Mrs. Wade. Happens every day. The world wouldn't be full of people if it didn't."

Mrs. Kingsley had been right, of course. I was pregnant. I had to call Consolidated and tell them I couldn't accept the job. I wouldn't be going to work, exchanging pleasantries with my co-workers, joining the other women in coffee breaks. The knowledge was like a jailer's key being turned in the lock. Wade House, gloomy, forbidding, seemed destined to be my prison.

Jeff was irritated by the news, not at all like the movie version of the breathless, unbelieving father-to-be. He acted as if I had purposely gone and acquired some sort of disease. "What'd you have to do that for?" he asked.

"I didn't do it by myself," I said bitterly. "What's wrong with having a baby?"

"It complicates things, that's all."

"What things?"

He didn't answer but slammed on his hat and stormed out the door leaving me with the sick feeling of despair. Jeff would get over his resentment, I told myself. It was just the shock of the news. When he got used to the idea he would come around and be happy, the way he was supposed to be. But that small voice inside me asked, What if he doesn't? What then?

I only saw Mrs. Kingsley at meals. She watched me with a new, hostile awareness, her gypsy eyes traveling over me every time I came into the room. I did not give her the chance to be alone with me, to tell me again that having a baby would not hold, "trap" was the word she had used, Jeff.

Tony made just one remark. "You're a bigger fool than I thought you were." His words should have whipped me into further abasement, but they were uttered without malice, and in his odd way, I supposed that Tony felt sorry for me.

Seward as courtly as ever, opened doors for me, spoke politely, inquired after my health each day—all in his usual, indifferent, far-off manner.

It was Ernestine Wade who reacted with excitement, with a childish delight, when Mrs. Kingsley announced the news at dinner one night. "A baby!" Mrs. Wade clasped her hands together and her pale eyes came to life. "How wonderful! I can hardly believe it. We're going to have a baby at Wade House. It's been so long." There were two little spots of color on her white cheeks. "You know, I had a baby once. Her name was Lottie. She was the sweetest little girl. Oh, I hope it's a girl. Do you think it will be a girl? Oh, Lottie. . . ."

"Ernestine!" Mrs. Kingsley barked. There was a ringing, warning quality in the way she pronounced Mrs. Wade's name.

Ernestine gave her a darting, terrified look. She smiled nervously and ducked her head. Nobody said anything. It was a silence, heavy with mysterious and unknown meanings. Lottie was not to be discussed. Lottie had died some twenty-odd years ago, a little girl of two, hardly more than a baby. And yet her shadow hung over the room in some dark, unknown, menacing way.

SIX

November was a gray, chilly month. The mornings were dismal and overcast. Sometimes at noon the sun would break through and the clouds would melt under its warmth, revealing a startled blue sky. But then, more often than not, the high fog would roll in from the sea at three-thirty in the afternoon and hang like a dirty canopy over the leafed tree-tops.

I often would go out on long walks. The Point, about a mile from the house, was my usual destination. I was not allowed to go all the way out to the furthest spit of land, since this was a military reservation. There was a little light-house there, guarded now by two pacing coast guard sailors. But I found a stone bench high above the water, and here I would sit by the hour. The wind would come tearing in from the sea with a cold, bluff anger. But I did not mind. It had a fresh smell, clean and brisk, not at all like the dank odor of Wade House. From where I sat I could see the huddled gray shapes of battleships and cruisers anchored in the bay. Flocks of gulls swooped down among the hulls.

For a time I would forget my own problems, sitting there on the edge of the cliff. But then, I would walk back through the meandering streets, up the straight, gravel driveway under the thick trees, and through the iron gate. And Wade House would grimly swallow me up, as if there were no other world.

I thought vaguely of going back to Colton. I hinted at it in a letter to my stepmother when I told her that I was expecting a child. I wrote that Jeff would be leaving soon and that I might want to come back when he did. Mother answered promptly, saying that I might have waited to get married, much less having a child. (The wedding she had been deprived of still rankled.) "It would be nice to see you, Nancy, of course," she wrote. "But I don't know where we'd put you

up. The Army Air Base has requisitioned our house and we are brimming with young lieutenants. I'm run off my feet. But they are such sweet, young men. . . ." I could picture Mother loving every minute of it, her face flushed with excitement, dishing up her famous fried chicken to a ring of appreciative males around her dining table, exchanging quips with them, handling their confidences. "Aren't you getting along with Jeff?" her letter asked. "I'm sure his family would want you there at such a time. . . . the birth of a Wade son and heir. . . ."

I knew, then, that I couldn't tell her the truth. I could imagine her derisive exclamation, "Couldn't you hold him?" A woman, if she was feminine at all, could always "hold" a man in Mother's book. I could see the secret smiles of my classmates, the pitying glances of the girls who had been Mother's roomers. "Poor Nancy," they would say, "couldn't make a go of it. I knew he was too handsome for her. Wonder why he ever married her in the first place?"

And, too, somewhere deep down, there was still the feeling that Jeff's attitude was transitory. He might have his little fling. Why not? Soon he would be going out into that sea of destruction. Life was too sweet for him not to want to have every mouthful of it before it was too late. But he would come back. He would come back to me, older, wiser, and the time of unrest would be over.

I soon settled into a miasmatic, dull routine. My morning sickness was with me in the afternoon and evening as well. The sight of food would be enough to turn my stomach. I lost weight. My face wore a hollow, haunted look, with purple smudges beneath the eyes. I spent most of my time, when I wasn't walking, reading in my room. I read novels, mysteries, romances, tales of imaginary heroes and heroines who always managed in the end to live happily ever after. I yearned to lose myself in anything that would push aside, even momentarily, the painful reality of my situation.

There were many nights when Jeff did not come home at all. When he did come home he was preoccupied, perfunctory in his remarks to me. He was affable with Mrs. Kingsley, though. They conversed together in the kitchen for long periods. I could hear them talking and laughing through the closed door, as if there were a great wealth of things they had to share. And although I longed to push open the door,

mentally inventing all kinds of excuses for intruding upon them ("I was just coming in for a cup of coffee," and so on.) pride forbade me.

One night all of us, except Seward, were at dinner. Seward had gone to an air-raïd warden meeting, and then he was spending the night with an old friend who had also retired from the Army and was living in Bonita. I remember there were Tony, Ernestine Wade, Mrs. Kingsley, Jeff and I seated at the table. Mrs. Kingsley was saying that there had been several robberies in the neighborhood—"All this riff raff that's come to California to work in the defense industries. Okies. Fruit-pickers. That's what's increased the criminal element."

Tony said, "Seems to me 'riff raff' was what made California. I've never heard that the gold rush crowd in the forties were the solid citizen type."

But Mrs. Kingsley had warmed to her subject and she hardly heard Tony. "Take that awful thing that happened at the Oldhams' the other night," she went on. She was referring to the case headlined in the evening paper. During that discouraging fall of 1942, having little to report on the progress of the war in the Pacific, the papers had played up the story of a burglar who had beaten up an elderly woman a half mile from Wade House, robbed her, and raped her spinster daughter. Mrs. Kingsley dwelled on the details with a relish that set my teeth on edge. Jeff laughed and said, "Well, Nancy, if you see anybody coming at you there's a revolver in the side table. Shoot him dead." He held an imaginary gun in his hand and pointed it at me.

Tony said, "Potted already, Jeff?"

Jeff's face was flushed and there was that telltale glitter that I was beginning to know so well in his eyes. But he responded good-humoredly. "Do you a little good to have a swig now and then, Tony. Might loosen up the laugh muscles."

"Well, if you're flying tonight, you could try staying sober. Too many loose muscles won't keep that plane upstairs."

"I'm perfectly sober. See?" Jeff flapped his arms.

That was the way it was between those two. Tony needling Jeff, and Jeff, secure in his self-esteem, never feeling the tiniest puncture.

We had scarcely finished dessert when Jeff pushed back his chair. "Got to shove off," he said. "Night flying, you

know." He picked up his hat on the sideboard and put it on at a cocky angle. "Don't wait up for me, Nancy. I don't know when I'll be back. Might just stay over and bunk in with Briggs at BOQ."

"All right," I said in a low voice, then fixed my eyes on the remnants of chocolate pudding in the glass dish before me. Mrs. Kingsley was staring at me with a smirk behind her eyes. I could tell that she was thinking, "He doesn't want to come home." I didn't want to look at her. I didn't want to betray by a breath what Jeff's casual words had meant, how they had hurt.

"Wait a second," Tony said as Jeff started toward the arched doorway. "I've got duty tonight at the Station. I'll ride over with you."

After they were gone Mrs. Kingsley started to gather up the dirty plates. I didn't offer to help. After her rebuff on the first day at Wade House, I had kept our relationship as distant as possible. "Excuse me," I mumbled, as I rose. Ernestine got up too.

Mrs. Kingsley said, "As soon as I get the dishes done, I'm leaving." Her remark was addressed to both Mrs. Wade and myself.

"Where are you going?" asked Ernestine.

"A friend is calling for me. I thought I needed a change. We're going up to Los Angeles for the weekend."

I wondered if her "friend" was the burly, broad-shouldered sailor I had seen her with at the hotel.

"You're going to be gone for two whole days?" Ernestine asked in a little woebegone voice.

Mrs. Kingsley made a wry face. "Oh, you'll be all right. You and Nancy can manage. I can't stay here *all* the time. I need a couple of days off."

"But——" Ernestine began.

I interrupted, "It's perfectly all right, Mrs. Kingsley. I'm sure we'll get along." Two whole days without Mrs. Kingsley. I would do the cooking. I had never prepared a meal for Jeff. I'd have the fried chicken tomorrow night, just the way Mother had taught me to prepare it. And I . . .

"There's tomorrow's meal . . . a stew . . . already made up in the refrigerator," Mrs. Kingsley said, puncturing my plans.

When Ernestine and I were left alone, I asked her, "How's about a game of checkers?"

"No," she said. "My head hurts."

"Let me get you some aspirin."

"That's sweet of you, Nancy. I think I'll go on to bed."

I got her the aspirin, and then since there was nothing else for me to do I went upstairs and to bed, also.

Hours later I was awakened by the banging of a shutter somewhere down below. The drapes were billowing in a strong wind. As I closed the window I noticed that the evening, which had been one of the few fair ones we had had in a long time, had turned cloudy. There was no moon, only a black scudding sky. The wind thrashed at the pepper trees and bent the pines and eucalyptus into grotesque shapes. The ormolu clock said eleven-thirty.

I heard the front door slam downstairs. Someone had come in. Jeff? I didn't think so; he never came home until one or two in the morning, if he came at all. Tony? When he had duty at the Air Station he usually stayed until morning. Then I thought it might be Jeff, after all. I waited for his step on the stair. There was none. I got into my robe and without bothering with slippers crept out into the darkened hall. A faint eerie light came in through the glass-paneled door in the vestibule.

"Jeff?" I was surprised at the tremor in my voice. There was no answer. Instead I heard a muffled, shuffling sound in the dining room. Then a flick of penciled light flashed through the vestibule. Suddenly Mrs. Kingsley's savory recounting of the robbery and murder at the Oldhams' came back to me in all its terrifying detail. Somewhere a tree slapped and scraped against the house. The floor boards above me creaked, and my hands, gripping the bannister, became damp with fear. Mrs. Wade and I were alone; two defenseless, timid women, one in premature dotage, the other with child. My mouth was dry. I could not swallow. In my mind's eye I could see the thief, a black hat pulled low over his forehead, gloved hands furtively going through the sideboard. He would find the silver. Would he be content with that? Or would he come softly up the stairs, find me, and demand money. Jeff kept me on short rations and I had no money. What would he do next? Would he leave me then and go searching through the house, find Ernestine. . . . I shuddered.

I remembered Jeff's jocular remark about the revolver.

Stealing back into the room, I opened the drawer of the side table. The gun lay there, black, sinister. I had never held a gun before, had never seen one that close. For a moment I was more frightened of the gun than the burglar downstairs. But the thought of an unknown assailant stalking in the darkness overcame my squeamishness. I picked up the gun, hard and cold, and went back into the hallway.

Now, from below, I could hear the opening and shutting of drawers. I wondered why the thief wasn't more silent in his search. There was a crash, a tinkle of glass. A lamp? A vase? I slid my bare feet down a half-dozen steps, my ears straining. I wasn't going to confront him unless I had to.

A loud string of swearing shot through the hall. Familiar words in a familiar voice. It was Jeff! Relief sent a tremor through me. I could not be mistaken. I scurried down the staircase and switched on a light. Jeff came through the arched doorway of the dining room walking unsteadily, a whiskey bottle in one hand.

"Thought you were asleep," he said. "Go on back to bed, Nancy." His consonants were slurred and he swayed a little.

"Why are you at home?" I asked. "Aren't you supposed to be flying?"

"I am," he said. "I'm way up there in the sky now." He pointed upward and laughed at my blank look. "Simmons and I checked out together. I let him take the Daring Dauntless up. All by his lonesome. Nobody'll know the difference."

Jeff had told me about Simmons, an enlisted aviation mechanic, who often went flying with him in the double-cockpitted Dauntless, the Navy dive-bomber used extensively during the early part of the war in the Pacific. Simmons was a frustrated would-be pilot and never lost a chance to go up with any of the flyers who would take him.

"Won't they find out that you haven't gone up when Simmons comes back alone?" I asked.

"I'll let Sim worry about that." He shrugged his shoulders and took a long drink out of the bottle. "I got more important things to do. I left my billfold in the dining room and had to come back for it." He patted his coat pocket. "So long, Nancy." He took a step toward the front door.

"Jeff . . . wait!" He turned. "Where are you going?" I had to ask.

"What's it to you?" he said.

All the humiliations I had suffered, the indignities of his indifference, of his displeasure, were centered in that question: "*What's it to you?*"

"I'm your wife," I said, and it sounded like one of Tony's hollow mockeries.

Jeff laughed then, a nasty, loud laugh. "Oh, Christ! Don't pull that wife stuff on me. I married you when I was half crocked. Forget it, will you?"

His words were a stream of molten lead running down my face, my arms, my body. "What do you mean, 'forget it'?" My throat was thick and hot.

"Just what I said. I'm tired of seeing that pasty face of yours mooning around. I've got somebody else now. She's pretty and she's fun." He took another drink. "And, furthermore, I'm not the father type. I don't want a sticky, messy baby."

"But Jeff. . . ." I felt sick, suffocating, as if I couldn't breathe.

"'But Jeff,'" he mimicked. Was that really Jeff standing there, his long shadow cast on the white, terrazzo floor, or some kind of cruel, malicious monster? "I've been meaning to tell you before. Might as well say it now," he went on. "You're going back to Colton. It's over. Finished. It shouldn't have ever begun. I'll buy your ticket home, and you can start packing now. You and that brat-to-be. I don't ever want to see it."

"No . . . Jeff . . . no. Don't say that!"

"Well, I am saying it." He uncorked the bottle, threw back his head and took a long pull.

"I must have meant something to you. I must . . . when you married me. That week we spent together in Colton, those walks . . . that picnic . . . you made love to me."

"So what? You didn't *have* to marry me."

"You didn't have to marry me either. But you did."

"Oh, cut it out! It was a mistake. Can't you get that through your head? It was a mistake."

"It wasn't!" I was close to shouting. "You can't just call marriage a mistake without giving it a try."

"I have tried. I don't like it."

"What do you like?" The anger boiled up in me. "Drinking? Meeting your girlfriend at the Blue Note?"

"What do you know about that?" He took a step toward me. "Huh? Who've you been talking to?"

"Does it matter? I know that you can't keep away from liquor, your hands away from women."

"Shut up! That's enough out of you."

"I won't shut up!" I was screaming now.

He reached out and slapped me hard, so hard my head jerked back. My anger turned to frenzy. I lashed out at him, hitting him across the mouth. He grabbed my hands. "Listen you" I was struggling to free myself. I was still holding the gun. I don't know how it happened. Even now I go over and over it again in my mind, in my dreams. But the gun went off—the noise, a terrible thunder in my ears. He released the grasp on my wrists, and with a sudden jerking movement collapsed on the floor. I shut my eyes; jagged red bars darted across my eyelids. I wanted to faint, to die, to vanish in a puff, as if someone named Nancy had never been.

I took several steps backward until I could feel the hard newel post of the staircase digging into my spine. There was an acrid odor in the air.

When I opened my eyes Jeff was sprawled face down on the marble floor. He was clutching the broken neck of the whiskey bottle.

"Jeff?" My voice was a timid whisper. I moved toward him, heedless of the broken glass under my bare feet. I bent over him. "Jeff?" His hat had fallen off. He was so still, so unnaturally still. I put my hand to my mouth to suppress the scream that clawed at my throat. Then I felt a cold draft whipping at my robe. I looked up. Tony was standing in the doorway. For a frozen minute neither of us spoke.

"What . . . ?" He kicked the door shut. "What happened?"

The gun slid from my fingers. I heard it fall with a clanking thud. "I—I shot. . . ." I couldn't finish. My knees began to shake.

Tony crouched down and turned Jeff over. There was a streak of dark blood running down the side of Jeff's face. It came from a small hole in the side of his head. Deep inside I could hear myself asking, "Is he dead?" But no words came to my lips.

"Come into the kitchen," Tony said, taking me by the arm. He led me through the arched doorway, past the empty, oval

table and the silent chairs of the dining room into the kitchen. He switched on the light and sat me down. "Some brandy will fix you up. Then you can talk." He poked through a cupboard and came out with a bulb-shaped bottle. He got two glasses and poured both of them full.

"Drink up." He handed me a glass. I shook my head. "Drink!" he commanded. I did as he told me. I could feel the fiery liquid fanning out inside me, warming my icy limbs.

Tony sat down opposite me, and watched me narrowly over the rim of his glass.

"I—I," but I couldn't go on.

Tony pointed to my still half-full glass. "Finish it." I took another gulp. "Now, what happened?"

"I shot Jeff," I said.

He didn't say anything, but kept watching me. "I thought at first it was a burglar. The wind was banging a shutter and making such a noise. It woke me, you see. And I got the gun." It seemed that suddenly I had found my tongue and the words came spilling out. "He said that it had all been a mistake. That he had someone else. Someone who didn't have a pasty face. Someone who was pretty, who was fun. He was going to send me back. He—he hit me, and I . . . hit him back. And then the gun went off."

"Weird, isn't it?" Tony said, a puzzled look on his face.

"What?"

"Jeff was supposed to have been killed an hour ago in a plane crash. That's why I came home. To tell you. I was in the Operations Tower when it happened. Jeff was supposed to be flying blind, that is, no instruments. There was some kind of miscalculation and the plane just flew into the sea. They sent a launch out right away. But the plane sank without a trace. It's very deep off the Point. That's where it went down."

"Simmons. . . ?" I asked.

"Yes, Simmons was supposed to be with him."

"He let Simmons take it up. That's what Jeff told me . . . and he . . ."

"Jeff wasn't on it." Tony paused. "I wondered when I saw his car parked at the gate, but I never thought. . . ."

"No," I said. "But he's dead anyway—as incredible as it may seem." I looked down at my hands. They were clasped very tightly on my lap. The class ring had turned itself

around so that the bulge of tape showed. Jeff never did buy me a real wedding ring.

"Nancy, I'll have to call the police," Tony said.

"Yes," I said dully. "I guess you do."

Tony got up and went to the wall phone. After a minute, I heard him speaking. "There's been an accident," he said. "It's a police matter. . . ."

An accident. I had killed Jeff. I had shot him, and he was dead. I hadn't meant to. But . . . wasn't everything we did, with a seeming design, an accident?

"We'll sit here and wait," Tony said, coming back to his chair.

"Yes," I said. Outside the wind had intensified. It howled and shrieked around the corners. A shutter, that same shutter, beat incessantly against the house. Rain spattered at the windows.

"Your mother slept through it all," I said. "She had a headache and took an aspirin. But she'll know when she wakes up. I——"

"You needn't worry about Mother. It's not a nice thing to say. But she was never . . . well, very maternal about Jeff."

"Yes, but he was her son." *Was*. He *was* her son. Now, I would be speaking of Jeff in the past tense. I couldn't believe it. Not yet. I remembered the first time I saw him, how handsome I thought he was with his finely molded features, his deep-set eyes. His smile was so alive. And now. . . . I felt the bitter, unshed tears in my eyes. "There's Mrs. Kingsley," I said. I could see her cold, gypsy face, feel all her pent-up fury against me breaking, and released at last.

"Don't worry about it. Just don't think," Tony said. "And, Nancy, when the police come I don't want you to say anything. Just tell them you won't make a statement until you see a lawyer. You don't have to, you know."

"But I did it, Tony. I killed him."

"It was an accident. The gun went off."

"Yes . . . yes, it was that way. But Tony . . . oh, Tony . . . I was so angry. He said such terrible things. I might have killed him anyway."

"Do you *know* that?"

"I—I . . . it's so hard for me to remember. He had that bottle . . . and he told me to pack. He said——"

"We won't go over it, Nancy. Just let me do the explaining, what's absolutely necessary. All right?"

I nodded. We were silent then. The rain beat a steady tattoo against the outer walls. The refrigerator switched on with a shudder and loud whirr. The banging shutter slapped at my ears. I wished it would stop.

"I'm going to fix that thing," said Tony. It was getting on his nerves, too. He found an old raincoat, much too short for him, in the broom closet, and went out the back door into the driving rain. "I've got a jeep waiting outside at the gate," Tony said, pausing on the threshold. "A sailor brought me over. While I'm out I'll tell him to go on back."

I was terrified when Tony left. The house seemed to tremble at each new gust of wind. I tried not to think of Jeff lying on the terrazzo floor, his unseeing eyes staring at nothing. I looked at the table. It had a red-checked oilcloth, I remember, with a border of yellow ducks. I started to count the ducks.

Tony was taking a long time. Soon time would have little meaning for me. But now each minute expanded into an hour of agony. I thought of going out in the rain to look for him. Anything would be better than sitting there alone.

Just as I rose to my feet, Tony came back. Little rivulets of water streamed from his hat and his shoes were all muddy. "Had to get a ladder before I could reach the thing," he said, as he shrugged out of his damp raincoat.

Then we heard the shrill ring of the front door bell. "Stay here," Tony said. "That must be the police. You stay here."

"No. I want to come," I said.

We went back through the dining room. The bell, insistent, demanding, rang again. The light was still on in the vestibule. The shattered glass glinted in fragments on the floor.

But the sprawled body of Jeff and the gun were gone.

SEVEN

I clung to Tony's arm while the room swung around, slowly, at first, then faster and faster. I buried my face in his rough coat sleeve, while inside my head the dizzy whirl continued. Then Tony was shaking me. "For God's sake, pull yourself together. Don't faint now," he was saying. I opened my eyes. The room was still revolving, but I could see Tony's face. It had a greenish hue and there was a white tightness to his mouth. The ringing bell had given way to heavy pounding on the door. "I have to let them in. There's got to be some explanation for this."

He led me over to the staircase and sat me down on the bottom step. Then he opened the door and two men entered.

"We had a report of an accident. A shooting," the shorter one said. He removed his hat. He had gray-white hair, clipped very close so that it stood up like bristles on a brush. "You're Lieutenant Wade, the man who put in the call?"

"Yes," said Tony, "and this is Mrs. Wade. Mrs. Jeffrey Wade, my sister-in-law, the wife of the man who's been shot."

The man looked at me through cold blue eyes. "I'm Captain Caldwell from Homicide, and this is Lieutenant Parsons." He indicated the other man with a jerk of this thumb. Lieutenant Parsons was the taller of the two. He did not take off his hat. I noticed that there was a dark, ugly scar running down the side of his right cheek. He face was gaunt, unsmiling.

"Where's the man who was shot?" asked Captain Caldwell.

I could see Tony swallowing several times, and then he said, "What?"

"The man who was shot," repeated Captain Caldwell. He spoke in curt, staccato words. "The body."

"Yes," said Tony, "but——"

"But what?" asked Captain Caldwell. Lieutenant Parsons did not speak. He kept his thin, slitted eyes on Tony.

"It was my brother who was killed," said Tony. "But—he's gone."

"He's—*what?*" the brush-haired man asked. "Say, this wouldn't be some kind of hoax, would it?"

"Hoax? Hell, no." Tony swallowed again. "I don't understand it. My brother came home unexpectedly about an hour ago. His wife," he inclined his head toward me, "was frightened. She heard some noises downstairs. She thought it was a burglar. All those reports in the papers scared her. She got a gun. My brother had told her about it before. She came downstairs. They—she and my brother—had a quarrel and the gun went off accidentally. . . ."

"Where did all this happen," Caldwell asked.

"Right here in the hallway," said Tony.

"You left your brother's body here?"

"Yes."

The man with the scar crouched down on his heels. "Don't see any blood," he said.

"But there *was*." I spoke up. "All down the side of his face. it was—" I hid my face in my hands.

"There isn't any blood here," I heard the scarred man, Parsons, say. I looked up.

Captain Caldwell spoke. "And you say the body is gone?" A small note of skepticism had crept into his curt voice.

"Yes," Tony said. "We left him here . . . and then went into the kitchen where I called you. Then we waited. And we didn't come back until you rang the bell. Then he was gone."

"And you didn't leave the house?"

"No," said Tony, "I didn't."

It was not until long afterwards that I remembered he had gone out to fix the shutter. But, then, it didn't seem important.

"What's this broken glass on the floor?" Caldwell asked. "Smells like whiskey still in here. Broke the bottle, eh?"

"It was Jeff's bottle," I said. "He was holding it, drinking from it . . . when I—" My head was fuzzy, and the words came out slurred.

"When you what?" asked Caldwell. "When you shot him?"

"Yes." I said. "I——"

Tony interrupted sharply. "Nancy! Let me handle this."

He turned to Caldwell. "They were struggling and the gun went off."

"And he fell in the hallway here?"

"Yes," said Tony.

"Where's the gun?"

There was a strained silence.

"It's gone, too," Tony finally said.

Again the silence, while the two men exchanged a long meaningful look. "You two been drinking?" asked Captain Caldwell. He had a habit of rubbing his short nose with his fist.

"No," said Tony. A flush spread across his face. "We had a glass of brandy in the kitchen. It was a pretty shattering experience . . . the shooting. And Mrs. Wade is expecting. She was hysterical. . . ."

"A glass of brandy?" Captain Caldwell watched us closely. "Sure it wasn't any more than that?"

Tony's flush deepened and I could see his body stiffen. "Now, look here," he said. "I didn't call and invite you out here just for your company. Neither Mrs. Wade nor I were drunk . . . or anything else your little minds want to suggest. My brother was lying on this floor, *dead*, not an hour ago."

"O.K., O.K.," said Captain Caldwell. He rubbed his nose with his fist. "Got any ideas where he could be?"

Tony shook his head.

"He *was* dead? Couldn't have been stunned? Couldn't have just got up and walked out?"

"No," said Tony. "I said he was dead."

Caldwell turned to his partner. "Parsons, go out and have a look around. Just in case."

Parsons left, closing the door behind him upon the battering rain. Caldwell took out a crumpled pack from his pocket and shook out a cigarette, offering it to Tony. "Not now," said Tony.

"Maybe we'd better sit down and try to figure this one out," said Caldwell.

"We can go into the study," said Tony.

He helped me up from the stairs. I staggered a little. My knees were like rubber, my feet numb with cold. We went into the study, just off the vestibule, the same room where Ernestine Wade and Seward played checkers. Caldwell motioned Tony and me to the tufted sofa. We sat apart.

Captain Caldwell drew up a straight chair and sat facing us. "Anyone else at home?" he asked.

"Only my mother," said Tony. "And she's asleep."

"She didn't wake up when the shot was fired? She didn't hear anything?"

"Her room's in the back of the house."

"On the ground floor?" Captain Caldwell lit a cigarette and put the spent match in his pocket.

"Yes," answered Tony.

"And she didn't hear anything?" Caldwell repeated. "Don't you think that's kind of funny?"

"She's asleep," Tony said. "And I don't think it's funny."

Parsons came back in, shaking the rain from his hat. "Man, it's sure coming down," he said.

"See anything?" asked Caldwell.

"No, not a thing. It's enough to drown a duck out there." He leaned up against the wall, crossing his long legs, and lit a cigarette.

Caldwell said to me, "O.K., now let's begin at the beginning."

"Wait," Tony interrupted. "Mrs. Wade——"

"I'd like to hear it from Mrs. Wade," said Caldwell.

"I'll talk for her," Tony said. "Can't you see she's upset?"

"You can speak your piece later, Lieutenant."

"Listen. . . ." Tony half rose from his seat.

I put my hand out. "Please, Tony," I said. "It's—it's all right. I'm feeling better now. I. . . ."

"Go ahead, Mrs. Wade," said Caldwell. He gave me a grimace that passed for a smile.

I tried to tell him what happened from the time I was awakened by the banging shutter until Tony arrived. My words were faltering, and it was hard to keep my thoughts in a straight line. He asked me one or two questions, urging me on when I hesitated.

"What did you and your husband have the fight about?" he asked. He was looking at my face, and I wondered if my cheek showed a mark where Jeff had hit it.

"I—I . . . it was a family matter." I couldn't tell him that Jeff wanted to send me home. In some odd way it seemed more shameful to admit than the shooting.

Parsons shifted his position and flicked his cigarette ash on the rug. I thought he was going to say something, but he

dragged at his cigarette through half-closed eyes and was silent

Caldwell turned to Tony. "O.K., Lieutenant. Go ahead. How do you fit into this?"

Tony said that he had been at the Air Station. He had gone up to Operations to speak to a friend when the news came that Jeff's plane had gone down. "Nobody knew that Jeff wasn't in it. Just Simmons. He was the aviation mechanic who took the plane up instead of Jeff." Tony went on to explain how he had come home to tell me the news of the crash. When he walked in I was standing over Jeff with the gun in my hand.

"And then the body disappeared—just like that, right?" Caldwell's tone was now baldly skeptical.

"Not *then*," Tony answered. "After we came back out of the kitchen. I've already pointed this out. . . ."

There was a little flutter at the door. We all looked up. It was Ernestine Wade. She had a long chenille robe on, the white shoddy hem dragging on the floor. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know we had company, Tony. Who are these men?"

Tony, jumping to his feet, hurried over to her. "It's just friends," he said. "Mother, please go on back to bed."

"But I want to meet them," she said. Her tone was sleepy, petulant.

"Not now, Mother." He tried to guide her from the room.

"Just a minute," said Captain Caldwell.

"She's been asleep, I tell you." Tony's voice was low and tense. "There's no use bringing her into this."

"Let me decide," the Captain said.

"What does he want to decide, Tony? What does he want to decide?" Her face was as white as the robe, and her eyes darted about the room fearfully.

"Have you been asleep all evening, Mrs. Wade?" asked the Captain.

"Oh, yes. I've been sound asleep. Nancy gave me those two aspirin, and I never woke up." Her childish voice trembled. "I'm thirsty, though. Those pills made me thirsty."

"I'll bring you a drink later," said Tony. He put his arm around her shoulder and took her from the room. This time Caldwell did not try to stop him.

There was no sound in the room but the wet spattering of the rain against the windows. Presently Tony returned.

Captain Caldwell gave him a hard stare. "We could search the place. But it beats me why you would call the cops . . . and then hide the body."

"I didn't *hide* anything. Search the whole damn house, if you like."

"Listen, fly-boy," Caldwell's eyes were stony, "don't get your back up. We didn't come down here in this flood just for kicks. *You* called us, remember?"

"I don't like being labeled a liar or a drunk," said Tony.

"Where's your telephone?" asked Caldwell.

Tony gestured to the vestibule.

"What's the number of the Air Station?"

Tony gave it to him.

We could hear him calling. He identified himself and asked to be connected to the Operations Tower. I heard him say, "I wonder if you could tell me if there has been a report that Ensign Jeffrey Wade was, or is, flying tonight?"

There was a pause. And then, "Yes—yes, I see. There's no chance of a mistake? Uh-huh. O.K. Thanks."

Caldwell came back into the room. "Your brother went up, all right, with an aviation mechanic named Simmons. The plane went into the Pacific about two, three hours ago. They're positive that *both* men were in it."

"But there's his car outside," Tony said. "It's parked at the gate. You can see he came home, if his car is here."

"Do you expect me to believe your brother was killed twice and disappeared both times? Remember, it's not his car we're looking for. It's him."

Tony started to say something, then changed his mind. He stared down at his hands, his face a blank mask.

Caldwell got up out of his chair. Parsons put on his sodden hat. "Lieutenant," said Caldwell, "I don't know what kind of game this is. Maybe when you and Mrs. Wade have sobered up——"

Tony leaped to his feet. "How many times do I have to tell you we're *not drunk*! He was clenching and unclenching his fists. I was terribly afraid that he would lose control and only make it worse.

"It don't make any difference what you are. We can't establish a shooting—manslaughter, murder, take your pick—unless we have a body. *Corpus delicti*. Right?"

Tony didn't answer.

"I think what happened," Caldwell continued, "is that Mrs. Wade, maybe both of you, were hitting the bottle, and you got into some kind of fight. You couldn't handle her, so you thought you'd scare her by calling the police——"

It happened very quickly. Tony jumped at Caldwell. I screamed, "Tony!" Tony caught his foot in the runner of the rocking chair and stumbled. Caldwell hadn't moved an inch. "Go ahead and hit me, Buster," he said. "Then maybe I can haul you in on an assault charge and my trip down here won't be for nothing."

"Please, Tony. Please. . . ." I was crying now.

Tony just stood there, the greenish cast to his face had returned. "Get out," he said in a low tight voice. "Before I decide to take you up on that assault charge."

After they had gone Tony began to pace up and down, back and forth. He didn't say one word to me. I felt sick and helpless. If it were a dream I would wake now. A dream. But there was the card table in front of the fireplace with the checkerboard laid out and the little stacks of red and black discs. There was a lamp beside the board. It had a beaded green shade and leaned a little to one side. And Tony was going back and forth, his face grim. "Do you think . . . Tony . . . do you think. . . ." I was going to say, "Do you think we're dreaming?" But I couldn't.

"I don't know anything right now," said Tony. "I only know what I saw."

Suddenly a sharp pain gripped me. It lasted for a few seconds. There was a pause, then there was another. I bit my lip. It's the baby, I thought, I'm going to lose it. I killed its father. Now I'll . . .

I didn't want to lose my child. With a fierce perversity I battled wave after wave of agony. It seemed a losing fight. I put my head down on the sofa, grabbing at the scratchy velour with my hands. My face was wet with perspiration, and I began to whimper like an animal caught in some kind of trap. I heard Tony's voice from a long way off. I felt his arms around me, lifting me, carrying me, up and up. "Call the doctor," I said. "Call . . . Doctor Davis. . . ."

And then I didn't remember any more.

EIGHT

Tony told me later that Dr. Davis could not be reached that night. But I did not lose the baby. When Dr. Davis finally arrived the next morning, I was weak, but the pains were gone. "You're tougher than you think," Dr. Davis said.

"I'm not the one that's tough," I said. No, I thought, it's not me, but that tenacious germ of life inside me—growing, forming, taking human shape—that means to survive. For the first time it hit me that the child I was carrying was real, a person. Mine—and Jeff's. Would it be a boy or girl? Who would it resemble? Jeff? I turned restlessly on my pillows. I did not want to think of Jeff, Jeff, drunk, his ugly words, ". . . that brat-to-be. . . . I don't ever want to see it. . . ." His wish had come true. He wouldn't ever see it. I had fixed that. I threw the covers from me and tried to get up, as if by leaving my bed I could escape my thoughts. But the minute I got to my feet the room upended itself and I had to crawl back. I picked up a book and tried to read, but the picture of Jeff, whiskey bottle in hand, his sneering mouth, his body crumpling to the floor, came between myself and the printed words. I remembered, again, the vestibule floor, scattered with broken glass and nothing else, and my mind would pace like a crazy demented thing. Where had Jeff's body gone?

Finally, gratefully, Dr. Davis' sedative took hold and I fell into a fevered sleep.

Tony never found a trace of Jeff. "The only explanation I can think of," Tony said, "is that he wasn't killed right off. He must have come to, staggered out of doors. Maybe he wandered off toward the cliff and fell into the water. There's no other way I can see how it happened. I've searched the grounds. I can't find as much as a footprint. Maybe that's

because it was raining all night. Nothing would show with all that rain sweeping over it."

Tony had come into my room in the afternoon. His face was thin and drawn. He looked as if he hadn't slept for weeks.

I asked, "Don't you think we would have heard Jeff if he had come to and gone out? I mean, the door opening and closing?"

"Not necessarily. We were in the kitchen. The storm made a lot of noise."

"But the gun. The gun was gone, too."

"He probably took it with him."

"Why?"

"I don't know," he sighed in exasperation. "I just wish I did. He was probably out of his head. He picked it up. . . . Oh, God. It's no use speculating any more. I've gone over and over the thing a thousand times. It's better to forget the whole thing. We did our best to convince the police. They wouldn't believe us."

"What about the others, Ernestine, Seward. . .?"

"They think Jeff was killed in the plane crash. Let's leave it at that. It wouldn't serve any earthly purpose to tell them what really happened."

"How did your mother take it?"

"She got all nervous and fidgety, the way she does when a thing she can't quite grasp happens. She cried a little. Seward didn't have too much trouble calming her down though. It was Mrs. Kingsley who really went to pieces. She had the first case of hysterics I've ever seen her have. Dr. Davis had to give her a sedative."

The second day I was in bed Mrs. Kingsley came into my room bearing my breakfast on a tray. She looked terrible. I would never have known that she was the same woman. There were bruised, puffy rings under her reddened eyes. Her usually high-colored face, now devoid of makeup, was a sickly yellow. Her hair, whose black, glossy appearance I had always suspected was due to the aid of dye, was unkempt, and there was gray showing at the temples.

"You ought to be in bed, too," I said, feeling compassion spurred by guilt.

"No," she said, "I've tried it. I only get to thinking when I'm in bed. It's better to be up and around, doing things." She set the tray down on my lap. "It's a weakness to give in

like that. But—" She bit her lip and tears came to her eyes. "He was so young, so full of life. I should have prepared myself for something like that. But, when you love someone so . . . you never do."

I couldn't meet her eyes. I looked down at the tray. Orange juice in a tall frosted glass, coddled eggs, crisp toast, steaming coffee. Suddenly I was hungry. I wanted to eat. But in the face of her grief I was ashamed to. "No," I murmured. "You don't."

"He was so handsome. Even as a boy, he turned girls' heads. He was strong, full of vinegar. There wasn't a kid at school that dared pick on him, big, small, he could use his fists on all comers when he had to, and did. Ernestine said he was too wild. Wild? Healthy, peppy, a kid with a mind of his own. Always knew what he wanted and usually got it. I never had any trouble with him." She gave me an oblique look, and I turned miserably red. "Well, you're a widow, now," she went on. There was a touch of the old bitter hostility in her voice.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Mrs. Kingsley. You don't know how terrible I feel." It was true. If she only knew, how true.

She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her apron and blew her nose. "Eat your breakfast. You're carrying a baby now. You have to eat for two."

Her solicitude made me uneasy. It wasn't like her to be concerned about me. I didn't trust her new feeling.

She went on. "That baby is the only link we have with Jeff." Then as if she didn't trust her own attitude of friendship, she added, "It is his, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "It is."

"Well, I guess so. A girl of your type wouldn't be apt to play around." It was spoken as a plain fact, more as a reflection on my inability to attract men rather than as a compliment. But I didn't mind.

"I have to go downstairs now," Mrs. Kingsley said. "Rustle up something for Ernestine and Seward. There won't be a funeral. They haven't been able to find him. I—" Her voice broke. I looked down at the tray. "Eat your breakfast. I'll be back up later to pick up the things."

That night I had the first of the nightmares that were destined to haunt me for years. It was always the same. I was at the Hula House and Jeff was sitting under the potted palm

with a pretty blonde on his lap. The band was playing "People Will Say We're in Love." I went up to Jeff and I said, "We're going home." And Jeff sneered at me. "You're ugly," he said, "and I hate you. *You* go home. I don't want you." I had a gun in my hand. He kissed the blonde, and I put the gun to his temple and shot him. The blonde ran away. But Jeff sat there, dead, staring into nothing. Nobody seemed to notice. I tore the palm from its stone basin and scooped out the dirt. With superhuman strength that only comes in dreams, I picked Jeff up and crammed him into the basin, trying frantically to cover his body with the dirt. I replaced the palm. But his head stuck up over the side of the basin. When I looked around the music had stopped and all the dancers had gathered around me. Their faces were mean, murderous. The blonde was in front. Her eyes shone with a strange glitter. Her red, pouting mouth said, "She killed him. I saw it." And she pointed a long, scarlet-tipped finger at me. I would scream at them, "No, no, it was an accident. You've got to find the *corpus delicti* before you find me guilty." They started to crowd around me. There was the blonde, then Tony, then the little red-haired ensign, then the rest, a sea of anonymous faces, but each armed with a long kitchen knife. Closer and closer they came until I could feel their hot breaths and the pricking sting of their knives. Then I would awaken. Clutching the bedclothes, bathed in sweat, my heart would be hammering with fear. I was guilty, I would tell myself. It was not an accident. I killed him. Jeff . . . Jeff. . . . And for the rest of the night I would toss and turn, terrified of falling asleep and going back to that dream.

I was a widow now. I no longer had anything to hold me at Wade House. So I wrote home to Colton again, frankly asking my stepmother if I might come home. She answered, "Darling, we'd love to have you. But it would mean putting one of my brave soldiers out. I'm sure you'll understand. It's the least your father and I can do for our country."

Mother's patriotism was colored, I knew, by the fact that to have a pregnant daughter about might cramp her style. I was not being cynical. I had lived too long with Mother not to know every nuance of her feelings, her sentiments. Still it hurt to be rejected by one's own family. I was too proud to beg and plead to come home when I knew I wasn't wanted.

Daddy might have agreed to my return, but he was timid and ineffectual against Mother's stubborn wishes.

The days at Wade House were long and monotonous. And my relationship with the people in it did nothing to lighten the hours for me. Since Mrs. Kingsley had shown token friendship I tried to help her in preparing the meals. But it was impossible to get over my aversion toward her. It was the way she watched me that made me uneasy. Her eyes were no longer hostile, instead there was a strange speculation there that I found more unpleasant than her previous animosity.

Ernestine got on my nerves, too. She would follow me around like a puppy with a wistfulness that cloyed. "What are you going to name the baby?" she would ask. Or, "It's going to be a girl, isn't it?" I would go into the garden and she would be right behind me. Sometimes I would kneel with Seward among the flower beds and help him with the weeding. Ernestine would say, "You mustn't tire yourself, Nancy." And her hands would flutter out to me. "That kind of exercise isn't good for the baby." She meant well, in her own befuddled way, but it was difficult for me to accept dogged devotion knowing that I had put a bullet through her son's head.

Tony avoided me. At first I thought it was pure coincidence. He was seldom home anyway. But then I noticed that when he was there, he usually spent his evenings in his room. If, after dinner, he happened to come into the study where I might be sitting, he would not sit down, but would make some casual remark and then leave. It was clear that he did not wish to be alone with me; he did not want to discuss the circumstances of the night I had shot Jeff. Only once had he referred to that night, when he asked me, "Do you remember how the gun went off, Nancy? Were you holding it alone or were you both holding it?"

"Oh, Tony," I answered, "I don't remember. It all was so mixed up. It happened so fast."

He gave me a curious look. It struck me that Tony might have a small suspicion about me. Did he think that things had not happened as I had said? I tried to ask him, but he quickly changed the subject, and I did not have the opportunity again.

In December the weather cleared. There were mornings

when I awoke to actual sun shimmering through the draperies. Birds I had never seen before appeared in the garden. Some like the bluebirds, the robins, the woodpeckers, I recognized. But there were others yellow-winged, white-headed, small gray ones that were unfamiliar. They would be there a day or two, and then gone, passing through from the colder regions to their southern haunts.

Tiny flowered daffodils pushed up from the wet earth, opening in sweet, pungent clusters. "Chinese lilies," Seward called them. That was the year the song "White Christmas" swept the country, more poignant during those war years than it would ever be again because of the thousands uprooted to a land without snow, a land of perpetual summer.

But as beautiful as these bright sunny days were, I took no joy in the beauty around me. I seemed to be waiting, waiting on borrowed time for some unknown doom to catch up with me.

Christmas came and went with hardly a ripple in our daily lives. Seward fixed a small tree for Ernestine, and we made a show of exchanging little gifts, but no one, except Ernestine, had their hearts in it. Tony had been assigned as an executive officer to an aircraft carrier and was expecting to leave at any moment. His thin features and dark eyes were inscrutable. When he spoke it was in monosyllables, and only then, in answer to direct questions. Although he was kind and attentive, in an abstracted sort of way, to his mother, he rarely noticed the rest of us. So I was surprised one afternoon when he came to me as I was reading in the garden. He stood for a moment, his dark brooding face looking down at me.

"Why, hello, Tony," I said. "Something the matter?"

"They've found him," he said without preamble. "Yesterday."

I did not ask who. A strange sense of relief passed over me. Jeff's death had been real, after all. "Where?" I asked calmly.

"His body was washed up on the beach at the Silver Strand."

"Then . . . they must know about . . . about his being shot" I could visualize Caldwell with his bristly hair and Parsons, long and lean, standing over Jeff's sodden body on the wet sand. They would see the bullet hole in the side of his head.

The bullet I put there. But my wondering, my long waiting, maybe even the nightmares, was over. Caldwell and Parsons would take me away. My burden of guilt would be lifted.

"No. They don't know anything," Tony was saying. "Jeff's body has been in the water too long. Barracuda have eaten most of his face away." I shuddered. "They only identified him by his wallet, which was still intact in his pocket."

"They're sure it's Jeff?"

"Unless somebody else had his wallet."

"No. That's what he came back for that night. His wallet. Nobody else could have had it."

Tony was silent. Somewhere a dove called, haunting, melodious, sad. "Tony," I said breaking into his thoughts. "It *was* an accident. You do believe me, don't you?"

"What difference does it make now?"

"But it does, it does, don't you see? I'd never have done it deliberately. Never. I couldn't."

"Why shouldn't I believe you?" he asked. But that wasn't the answer I wanted. Why couldn't he tell me right out what he thought? "Better dig out your widow's weeds again," he said. "There'll be a funeral."

"Tony . . . the funeral. I . . . Is it necessary to go through that again? I mean, we had services for him." I thought of Mrs. Kingsley and her puffed, reddened eyes, Ernestine's agitated chatter, and my own face wearing a mask, rigid and stiff over a guilt-ridden conscience.

"Yes. I think it's customary when a person dies . . . and there's something to bury." There was the old dripping acid in his voice. He wasn't anything like the understanding, protective Tony I had known the night of the shooting. "Any objections?"

"None," I said shortly. Was there any use trying to explain? His words were deliberately meant to sting. "You needn't be so downright mean. I wish I hadn't come downstairs that night. I'd give anything not to have had that gun in my hand—anything in the world."

"It's pointless to cry about it now. It's past. *'The moving finger writes,'*—if you remember your Persian poet Omar—*'Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.'*" He gave me a brief, bitter smile. "If I were you, Nancy, I'd take my widow's inheritance and get out of Wade House as soon as you can." With that he turned and went back toward the house.

The sharp, twisting probe of Tony's words hurt. My widow's inheritance! I had almost forgotten that Jeff was to have been a wealthy man. Did Tony really still think that I had married Jeff for his money? And worse than that, that I had purposely shot him for it? No. Not even Tony, I told myself, would believe that of me.

The day after the funeral I received a telephone call from a man named Anderson. He was from the firm of Anderson, Rogers and Stine, Attorneys. His firm handled the affairs of the Wade family and had done so ever since Grandfather Wade had come to San Diego, and there was only Mr. Anderson's great uncle to represent him. "Mrs. Wade," said Mr. Anderson, "could you come in as soon as possible? We would like to discuss with you the late Mr. Wade's financial status. As his widow, I think that you ought to know the terms of his trust and so forth."

I made an appointment for the following day, wishing there was some way I could avoid facing a stranger and having to discuss Jeff.

Mr. Anderson was a tall, gaunt man in his late sixties. He was coolly correct, not unpleasant, except for the irritating way his teeth clacked when he talked. After the customary murmur of condolences on the death of my husband and a general observation of these "fine young men" who were gallantly giving their lives for their country, he plunged into the matter at hand.

"Mr. Alec Wade, your late husband's father, set up a trust for his son, Jeffrey, when he was still a boy. Jeffrey was to be supported by the income until he reached the age of twenty-five, when the principal would be his." Mr. Anderson took a pair of horn-rimmed glasses from his breast pocket, put them on, and shuffled through some papers on his desk. He cleared his throat and went on. "Mr. Wade would have been twenty-five . . . uh . . . let me see . . . one year and two months from now, to be precise, April 12, 1944." He peered at me over the top of his glasses.

I nodded because I sensed that it was expected of me, but his words seemed to come from a long way off.

"Now," he steepled his fingers, "you, as his wife, can continue to enjoy an income of—let me see—two hundred and fifty dollars a month plus medical expenses, and you may re-

ceive the principal of the trust exactly as is stated here. But there are two conditions. . . ." He paused.

"What are they?"

"That you go on living at Wade House and remain unmarried until that date . . . April 12, 1944."

I didn't say anything. What were conditions to me? I only felt that I was not entitled to Jeff's money, and I didn't want it.

"You may think the request rather odd, the part about living at Wade House, that is. But Mr. Wade wanted to be sure that if his son should marry before his twenty-fifth birthday, and then die, his wife would become part of the family by remaining on."

"I see," I said. Part of the family. Tony bitter, Ernestine childish, Mrs. Kingsley. . . .

"Didn't your husband ever discuss this with you?"

"No. I knew that there was a trust and that Jeff would come into money at twenty-five, but that was all."

"You don't know the sum involved?"

"No."

"It's five million and some odd thousand." Again he paused, an expectant pause.

What was I to say? Five million, at that point in my life, didn't mean any more than five thousand or five hundred. The whole business of taking money that belonged to a man I had shot, even accidentally, did not make sense to me.

"Of course, if you should die before that time, and I don't foresee that possibility"—he gave me a weak smile over the top of his glasses—"the money would be divided between Mrs. Alexander Wade and her other son, Mr. Anthony Wade, provided Jeffrey had no heirs."

"He'll have an heir," I said without thinking.

He lifted his eyebrows.

"I'm expecting Jeff's baby."

"Oh? I didn't know. Congratulations," he said dryly. "In that case, of course, the trust would go to the child. Providing, naturally, that the other terms are met with."

"Then, if I should leave Wade House before the stated time, my baby would lose both income and principal?" I asked. I had never thought of it in that light. My child receiving its father's money. It was a new angle, different from my taking it.

"Yes," he said. "That's correct. But you weren't thinking of leaving were you?"

"I had planned to strike out on my own after the baby was born next July."

"That would be foolish, don't you think, Mrs. Wade? After all, there are five million dollars involved here."

"Yes. I suppose you're right," I mumbled. I wanted to say, "That's blood money. I have no right to it." Supposing Mr. Anderson knew that I had shot Jeff, would he feel that I was entitled to the inheritance? "Let me think about it," I added.

He gave me a puzzled look.

"I—I didn't have anything when I married Jeff. I" Some sort of explanation was needed, for he kept looking at me in that questioning, perplexed way. "Money doesn't mean all that to me." His look became one of mild astonishment. I didn't blame him. There weren't many people who came into his office and were offered five million and then said, "I'll think about it."

"Aren't you getting along with the family at Wade House?" he asked.

"Yes . . . yes, I am. That's not it. . . ."

"Then what is it? Something troubling you?" For a moment I was tempted to tell him, to unburden myself and have it done with. I think if he had been a warmer, more friendly person I would have. But with his intent eyes behind their horn-rimmed glasses, he seemed more like a prosecuting attorney taking a witness through his paces, than a man one could confide in.

"No. . . ." I hesitated. "It's just that I've only been married a few months. And it doesn't seem fair that I, a perfect stranger, should come into Wade money. There's Ernestine . . . Tony. . . ."

"My dear Mrs. Wade," he said. "Don't let that worry you. It was unfortunate that your husband came to such an untimely end. But he married you . . . he loved you. If he had lived you would have shared the money with him. I know that he would be most unhappy if you didn't accept it now."

His words made me feel worse than ever. I looked away from him, past his desk and out the window where the sun glinted and flashed from the windows of the houses. "Yes," I murmured. "Still I'd like to think about it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's your privilege, Mrs. Wade. Let us know soon, won't you?"

"Yes. I will. By tomorrow," I promised.

When I got back to Wade House Mrs. Kingsley caught me just as I started up the stairs. "Been to see Anderson?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. She must have heard my telephone conversation the day before.

"How does it feel to be an heiress?" she asked, biting into the words.

"I'm not one yet," I said. "And I don't know as I want to be one."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because it's *Wade* money. I'm an outsider. None of you have ever made me feel differently, and you all resent me." I was surprised at my own words. It was the first time I had dared speak my mind to Mrs. Kingsley.

"Oh, rot!" she said. "Don't let us get under your skin. It's just our way." It was odd to hear Mrs. Kingsley speaking in this manner. She had never condescended or apologized before. "You've got to think of Jeff's baby," she said.

Yes, that would be it. She would want Jeff's child to have the money, rather than Ernestine or Tony.

In the end, my decision was influenced by just this very thing. I felt, whatever I had done, I could not disinherit my child. There was a practical side to my accepting the terms of the trust, too. It was simply that I had no money. Mother, of course, was perennially without funds. She couldn't send me anything, even if she wanted to. I could not go to work in my present condition. I would have to stay at Wade House.

The next morning I called Mr. Anderson and said that I was willing to meet with the terms of the trust.

NINE

As time went by Tony became more and more of an enigma to me. Occasionally he could be civil, almost pleasant and friendly. But this was rare. For the most part he was moody, prowling about the garden at night, or pacing the study floor. His speech was caustic, irritable. It was as if something was preying on his mind. It was not the war, or the uncertainties of his own position, because I was present once when he discussed this situation with Seward and his attitude was rationally calm. In my own mind I theorized that, like myself, he still could not explain how Jeff had disappeared on the night of his death. He would slam out of the house of an evening, and from my window I could sometimes see the gleam of his flashlight as he walked under the dark and dripping trees. The darting beam of his light would eerily trace the mossy paths and probe the tangled underbrush, and I would wonder. What was he looking for? Was it the gun, which was never found, a shred of clothing, a button, some sign? I never dared ask him.

Toward Mrs. Kingsley he was openly hostile. He resented her high-handed attitude toward his mother. And once, at dinner, he and Mrs. Kingsley nearly came to blows. It all started over Ernestine's remark to me that she had an old bassinet she was going to refurbish for the coming baby.

"What bassinet?" asked Mrs. Kingsley sharply.

Ernestine said in a small voice, "It used to be Lottie's."

"What?" Mrs. Kingsley snapped. "We can't have it. And that's that. I've thrown that broken-down thing away a dozen times."

"But it's a lovely bassinet," said Ernestine, her pale eyes filling with tears. "I'll get new ribbons for it. Pink, because it's going to be a girl."

"The thing's a piece of junk. One wheel is gone, the basket weaving's come undone and the paint is scraped off."

"Oh, Bella," Ernestine pleaded. "Seward has promised to fix it. And we're going to give it a nice, new coat of paint."

"Forget it," said Mrs. Kingsley. "Nancy is getting a brand new one. She doesn't want that old fusty relic."

"Wait a minute!" Tony broke in abruptly. "If Mother wants to fix up that thing for Nancy, I can't see why she isn't allowed to do as she likes."

Mrs. Kingsley's earrings jangled as she leaned across the table toward Tony. "I say no. It's morbid for her to hang on to things like that."

"Why?" asked Tony.

"Because I say so."

"I don't see why it should be any damned business of yours."

"It is my business. What I say goes."

Ernestine began to whimper. "Don't fight . . . please don't fight. I—I don't really care about the bassinet. I really don't."

"Damn it, anyway, Mother," Tony stormed. "Why do you always give in to her? The way you cringe in front of Bella makes me sick. I almost think she's got something on you, something she's holding over your head."

There was a hollow, embarrassed silence around the table. Ernestine's face turned ashy white. Mrs. Kingsley's mouth was a straight, grim line. And Seward gazed morosely down into his plate. I couldn't understand it. Why didn't Seward come to Ernestine's defense as Tony had? Why did he sit there with his blue eyes averted?

Suddenly Tony crumpled his napkin and threw it down. "Too many damn women in this house," he exclaimed and stalked out of the room.

One day, in early March, Tony came into the study just after lunch. Ernestine and Seward were playing checkers. I had been trying to learn to crochet from a book, and was halfway through a pair of lumpy bootees. They looked quite hopeless. Tony sauntered over to the table. He leaned over Ernestine's shoulder, reached out and made a double jump and handed her the two red checkers. "Easy does it, Mother."

She smiled up at him and patted his hand. He bent over

and kissed the top of her head. Although Tony was fond of his mother, he was not demonstrative, and I knew that something special had prompted this gesture. I wasn't wrong. He said, "Mother, I'm leaving."

"Are you, Tony? Will I see you at dinner?" she asked.

"No, Mother. That's not what I mean. Our ship is leaving for overseas tonight. I won't be back for dinner."

It took her a minute to grasp this, then her fluttery hands went to her lips, upsetting the board and scattering the checkers.

"Oh, Tony, no!" She got to her feet.

"It had to come sometime, Mother."

"I thought . . . I thought . . . that maybe they'd forget about you, and you could stay."

"I'm afraid not," he smiled ruefully and took her shaking hands in his.

"Oh, but Tony, you've been away so long . . . and now you've come back, and they're taking you away again."

"There are others going, too, you know."

She began to cry. My heart ached for her. I had thought that maybe when the time came for Tony to leave that she wouldn't quite understand the full meaning of his departure. But apparently she did.

Tony took her in his arms and kissed her fondly.

"You won't come back," she said.

"What a thing to say. That's not the way to send your son off. You can't get rid of me that easily." He smiled.

She sniffled, then wiped her nose on the sleeve of her blouse.

Seward was on his feet. He held out his hand. "Good-bye, Tony. I wish you all the luck in the world." They shook hands.

"Take care of Mother," he said.

"I will, Tony."

Then he came over to me. "Good-bye, Nancy."

I had dropped my crochet needles. Now I pushed myself up from the sofa. He took my hand. His expression was half amused. "It's been nice meeting you." I could not tell how he meant that.

"I wish you luck, too, Tony," I said.

"Do you?" There was no smile on his face now. His eyes held a deep, unfathomable, almost sad look. "There's some-

thing I've wanted to say. . . ." He stopped. I felt myself drawn to his look, wishing I could read its meaning.

"What is it, Tony?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

What had he meant to tell me? I wanted to press him, but with Seward and Ernestine watching I kept silent.

Tony squeezed my hand. "I hate good-byes. They always seem so corny. Just . . . take care."

We walked him out of the house and down to the gate where a jeep driven by an enlisted man was waiting for him. He kissed his mother again and shook hands with both Seward and me. Then he drove off. Mrs. Kingsley had not appeared.

The days went ahead with a desperate sameness. Except when Seward took me with him to the market, or when I went to the library, or visited Dr. Davis, I did not go anywhere. Twice I made the trip into San Diego to shop for a layette and bassinet for the baby. (As for Ernestine's bassinet it was never mentioned again.) Oddly enough, I did not seem to mind the endless hours spinning themselves out with such even regularity. I was approaching the isolated, "nesting" stage of my pregnancy. Locked in a physical world where I and the life inside me seemed to be in mystical communion, Wade House and its ugliness receded to the background.

Then, one day, Mrs. Kingsley announced that she had been requested by the Navy Department to take in three or four Naval officers. There was a shortage of quarters at the Station, and with the stepping up of the war in the Pacific and the subsequent influx of thousands of servicemen the Navy was hard put for accommodations. With the help of her Mexican cleaning woman, Paquita, she got several rooms ready in the cupola on the third floor. It had its own separate entrance and staircase on the side of the house.

I offered to help. Mrs. Kingsley said that I might if I didn't do any heavy lifting. Her concern over my well-being still puzzled me. She saw to it that I drank plenty of milk, that I took my vitamins, that I went for walks. But it was done without personal warmth. It left me with the queer impression that I was being fattened for the kill. There were many times when, urging a second helping on me or pointing

out the choice cut of meat on the platter she handed around at dinner, I had the feeling of a missionary being readied for the cannibal pot. It was an absurd feeling, and yet it persisted. She watched me closely when I was in her presence, inquired every day about the state of my health. If I returned from a visit to Dr. Davis, she grilled me for every detail of his remarks.

Even when I sat in the garden reading with my back to the house I had the eerie feeling that behind the drawn draperies of the multi-windowed house, Mrs. Kingsley's dark sloe eyes were scrutinizing me. Once I turned quickly and saw the flash of her gold earrings caught in a glint of setting sunlight as she quickly replaced the curtain. Another time I was exploring the vast grounds beyond the garden not too far from the edge of the cliff. I had come upon a grove of entangled oak trees. It was a somber, gloomy spot, the ground underneath spongy with a thick layer of leaf mold. In a small clearing beside the oaks was an old abandoned well, its top boarded over with rotted wooden planks. Although it was a clear day, the sun reached the clearing in thin, weak shafts. A damp coldness seemed to ooze up from the ground. Far below on the other side of the trees, as if from a great distance, I could hear the steady pounding of the ocean surf.

I was examining the top of the well when suddenly something made me look up. Facing me on the other side, across the planks, was Mrs. Kingsley. "I wouldn't come here, if I were you," she said. There wasn't any solicitude in her voice, only a hidden warning.

"Why not?" I asked. "It looks all right. The well is covered."

"It's not safe," she said. "The ground is slippery."

"I haven't reached that stage of clumsiness yet."

"It's better for you not to take chances." Her eyes were narrowed. She came around the well and took my arm. Her face was close to mine. I could see the beads of mascara on her eyelashes. "And we don't want to take chances with precious baby, do we?"

I did not like the way she said that. Her face, her touch, were repellent.

"You needn't worry about me," I said. "I'm not Ernestine."

She let go of my arm with a sharp, hissing intake of breath. "You think I'm hard on Ernestine?"

"Yes, I do."

"She has to be told, to be led, protected. She has the mind of a child, you know."

"Maybe. But that's no reason to be unkind."

She laughed a harsh, braying laugh. "Unkind? If you only knew. I'm the best friend she has. If it weren't for me—" She stopped abruptly.

"Yes. . . ?" I felt she was on the verge of some important disclosure, something that was vital to me. But she only said, "You'll remember that someday." And then she disappeared among the trees.

TEN

My baby was born in July, on the eighteenth of the month. It had been a cool day with drifting clouds when Seward drove me to the hospital. He kept twisting his head nervously in my direction, a little frown between his eyes. "You all right?" he'd say. "Sure you're all right?" I had never seen Seward lose his composure, and it would have been funny, if I weren't so uncomfortable and anxious myself. "I'm just fine," I assured him. "Don't worry, I won't have it in the back seat."

It was a girl. I named her Marianne Joan Wade. Ernestine was allowed to see me the second day. She came shuffling in, dressed for the occasion in a wide, floppy brimmed hat and trailing chiffon as if she were going to a formal garden party. Her white face was tinged with color and her voice came in quick little gasps. "Oh, Nancy, it's a girl! It's a girl!" She bent and kissed me. I had Marianne with me. Ernestine pulled back the pink blanket in which the baby was wrapped and peeked at her face. It was a red face still wrinkled from its precipitant passage into the world. Ernestine exclaimed over it, "Beautiful! Lovely! Just like Jeff." There was a glitter, a terrible longing in her eyes, and her hands kept moving toward the baby. I knew that she yearned to have her, but for some strange, shameful reason I was reluctant.

"May I hold it? Oh, let me hold her, Nancy," she finally asked.

I gave the fragile bundle up to her. She held it in her arms, her face close, crooning softly, "Lottie . . . Lottie . . ." over and over again.

That name set a stone of fear upon my heart. "Her name's Marianne," I said. "Marianne Joan."

But she didn't hear me. She was lost in the faraway world of her past. "Lottie," she continued, "we're going to have such good times together. Just you and me. Lottie . . ."

A fierce anger boiled in me. "Ernestine!" I called sharply,

in a voice that would have done credit to Mrs. Kingsley. "She is *not* Lottie. She's *Marianne*."

Ernestine looked up. There were tears running down her small ravaged face. Immediately I felt contrite. Did I have to be so selfish? She was just a harmless old lady who had once lost her child. How would I behave if I had lost mine? I should be able to appreciate what such a loss could mean. And yet . . . each time she called my daughter "Lottie" I shuddered.

Earlier in the month I had hired a nurse to be on hand after the birth of my child. It was only a temporary expedient. As soon as I got on my feet I planned to take care of the baby myself. Mrs. Fowler was a pleasant, middle-aged woman, plump, rosy-cheeked, the prototype of what a baby's nurse should be. If it hadn't been for her incessant, nonstop chatter I might have even enjoyed her. Opinions about the weather, the war, Wade House recipes, her own family problems, radio soap operas, all rushed from her lips without pause. I often wondered if she went on talking in her sleep. Nevertheless, she was efficient and loving to Marianne.

Ernestine hated Mrs. Fowler. It was a dislike I could not fathom. If Mrs. Fowler were in the room, Ernestine would not enter. If she accidentally came upon her, she would turn about and retrace her steps. One day I asked Ernestine if Mrs. Fowler had been rude or unkind to her, and if that was why she avoided her. "I don't like her," said Ernestine. "She's too much like Tessie Blount."

"Who is Tessie Blount?"

"A nasty person," said Ernestine with distaste. "She wasn't at all nice. And you couldn't rely on her." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "And I wouldn't trust that one"—she tossed her head—"either. She might go off and leave Lottie and Lottie would—"it was still Lottie—"and Lottie might fall into the water." Ernestine broke off suddenly as Mrs. Fowler came into the room. With a nervous twisting of her mouth Ernestine got up and backed out of the door.

I wanted to ask her, Who was Tessie Blount? Had she been a nurse to Lottie? And why wasn't she to be trusted? What was there about Lottie's death and everything surrounding it that caused such mysterious silences? Had Tessie Blount been present when Lottie was drowned? Later in the week when Mrs. Kingsley paid me one of her infrequent visits I

asked her point blank about Tessie Blount. Her reaction was one of anger. "Ernestine has a big mouth," she said. "Mrs. Blount was Lottie's nurse. And a very good one, too. But Ernestine was so jealous of her. She was jealous of anyone whom Lottie liked. Green-eyed all the time. She probably doesn't like Mrs. Fowler either."

"No," I said. "She doesn't."

"If Ernestine had her way, she'd want to take over."

"Take over? How do you mean?"

"If she had the chance she'd ease Marianne away from you—or anyone else."

"That doesn't make sense," I said, knowing all the while that it did.

"She calls her Lottie, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . figure it out for yourself. Just one word of advice. Whatever you do don't leave Marianne alone with her."

Her words chilled me. "Ernestine wouldn't hurt Marianne," I said. "She wouldn't. . . ."

"Not deliberately, no. But sometimes she has these fits."

"What kind of fits?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Something sets her off. She gets angry. Then she throws herself around like a crazy thing. . . ."

"Is that what happened when Lottie was drowned?" There was a chill along my spine.

"I wouldn't know," said Mrs. Kingsley in an enigmatic voice. "I wasn't there."

"Can't you tell me more about it?"

"About what?" Her voice and look were sharp.

I let the subject drop. It was like all the other times. Whenever Lottie's death was mentioned I came up against an obdurate stone wall.

But our conversation didn't prevent me from thinking about Mrs. Kingsley's words. I thought about them all the time. Had Ernestine, in an angry "fit," knocked Lottie into the water? "Whatever you do don't leave Marianne alone with her," Mrs. Kingsley had said. Was Ernestine also one of those deranged creatures who, having lost her own child, would snatch another to replace it? One read about such cases in the paper all the time; how a woman would disguise herself as a nurse, enter a hospital, and make off with a baby.

But this wasn't a hospital. We were all living in the same house. Ernestine couldn't very well "kidnap" Marianne. Might she take her away and disappear? Where? No, it didn't seem likely. Yet I could not help but look upon Ernestine with a fearful, suspicious eye every time she approached Marianne.

And Mrs. Kingsley's attitude was hardly reassuring. Since the birth of the baby she had become indifferent to me. Her interest, her watchfulness had been transferred to Marianne. Whenever she could she would touch or hold the baby. "She's a spitting image of Jeff," she would say, and a greedy, possessive gleam would come into her eyes. There was nothing soft or maternal about that look. Again I had the irrational illusion of the missionary and the cannibal.

My feelings of distrust were increased after Mrs. Fowler left. She could not stay on, even though I had asked her to, as she had other commitments. "I've enjoyed working for you," were Mrs. Fowler's parting words, "but frankly those two women give me the creeps . . . the way they hang over Marianne." So, it wasn't all my imagination. And yet what could I do? I couldn't very well avoid Ernestine and Mrs. Kingsley altogether, nor could I bring myself to forbid them handling the baby. Mrs. Fowler, when she was there, had acted as a buffer. She had been with Marianne constantly. Now we were alone and I felt hemmed in by my anxieties and suspicions.

The atmosphere of Wade House lay like a heavy pall over me. Even the presence of the four Navy men in the cupola didn't help. They lived apart from us, coming and going by the outside staircase. Occasionally, we would hear them laughing, the sound of their radio, a banged door. Now and then they used the telephone in the vestibule, borrowed a book of matches, asked for an extra blanket. But otherwise we never saw them. I got so I would jump at every noise, every moving shadow. I became tense, nervous. And my nightmares returned in full force—terrible dreams in which Jeff would grab the baby and run, and I, in hot, terrible pursuit, would sob that I hadn't meant to kill him.

I finally went to see Dr. Davis. He prescribed a tonic, reassuring me that my condition was not unique among new mothers, especially in a household where there were other childless women. "You're being overprotective," he said. "It's not good for the baby either. Try relaxing a bit."

I tried. The tonic helped some. My nerves ceased to jerk at every sound and movement. I fought against grinding my teeth every time Ernestine or Mrs. Kingsley approached. My dreams became less fearsome. But underneath there still remained a current of doubt, an uneasy qualm.

One sunny day I came home from a walk and parked Marianne's buggy on the porch. The sun was so warm and benign I decided to leave Marianne sleeping there while I went in for a quick lunch. Lunch had become an informal affair since Mrs. Kingsley was busy with her extra duties taking care of the rooms that belonged to our service guests. No one was in the kitchen as I helped myself to a sandwich and a glass of milk. I supposed that Seward and Ernestine had already eaten and were in the study over their inevitable checkerboard. Mrs. Kingsley was probably upstairs making up beds. It was peaceful in the kitchen, a clock ticked, the refrigerator purred. I dawdled over my lunch, taking more time than I had intended. I read the newspaper, helped myself to another glass of milk. I was just finishing the last of it when somewhere I heard a door slam, jolting me to awareness. A half hour had gone by. Feeling guilty at having left Marianne alone, I put my glass and plate in the sink and hurried out to the porch.

I bent down over the carriage to pick Marianne up.

It was empty!

I stood in that half-bent position staring down at the rumpled, turned-back blanket with its pink satin binding and smooth white sheet. I stared hard, so hard, as if my eyes, by their very intensity, could replace the tiny humped-up figure. The carriage remained empty. A cold nausea gripped me. "Marianne!" I called. I flew back into the house and into the study. Seward was there alone. He was reading a magazine. "The baby's gone!" I shouted at him. "I . . . left her in the carriage . . . and now . . . she's gone!"

Seward got to his feet, a small frown on his sunburned forehead. "Marianne's gone!" I repeated, wondering why he just stood there so dumbly. I grabbed his arm. "We've got to find her. Right away. Before it's too late. She's so tiny, so helpless. . . ."

He patted my hand. "Nancy, don't get all panicky. Tell me what happened."

"I left her sleeping on the porch and went in and had my

lunch, and when I came out she was gone . . . disappeared." My voice rose. "Where is she? I want her back. Where is she. . . ?" I babbled.

"Now, let's not go off half cocked. Could be Mrs. Kingsley picked her up—or Ernestine."

"Ernestine!" I shouted. "Where's Ernestine? She has her, I know she has her." How could Seward speak of my not getting panicky? He knew what Ernestine was like. Even if he was a man, a man who had never had children, didn't he understand what that meant? I could picture Ernestine reaching for my sleeping child with her trembling hands; how she would clasp Marianne to her breast crooning, "Lottie . . . Lottie. . . ." A wild terror clawed and tore through me. "Where is Ernestine?" I demanded.

"She was here just a minute ago."

"Ernestine thinks Marianne is Lottie, don't you see? Oh, my God! We've got to find her." My fingers dug into his arm.

"Come along, then, we'll go to her room." Dimly I could feel that he was annoyed at my hysterical insinuations. But I didn't care. We hurried down the long hall to Ernestine's room at the back of the house. It was a small room, so that my eyes scooting over the lilac-covered bed, the chintz, the ruffled curtains took it in at a glance. The room was empty. Not a sign of Ernestine or Marianne. I was shaking now. "She's taken her somewhere, I know."

"Be reasonable, Nancy. We don't even know that Ernestine has the child. It may be that Mrs. Kingsley has her, changing a diaper or something like that."

"No," I said stubbornly. "It's Ernestine. She's gone off with her."

"How could she? The poor woman never goes anywhere unless I take her."

"Why wouldn't she walk out of the gate and get on a bus? She could, you know."

"Not very likely. She's terrified of traffic." He took my hands trying to calm me.

Suddenly a more horrible thought struck me. I shook his hands free. "The cove!" Why hadn't I thought of it before? "Ernestine's taken her to the cove." She would bring my baby there, my baby whom she thought was Lottie. It was at the cove she had last seen her own child alive.

"Nonsense," Seward said. "She wouldn't go down there."

"Why not? She came to the cove the day I was there. That's where she had Lottie."

I ran from Seward back down the hall and out of the house. I tore down the path to the edge of the cliff and the iron gate. It was partly open and now my fright was like a demon within me. How I managed those stairs with their rotting weathered boards, I'll never know. When I was halfway down I saw the foreshortened figure of Ernestine. I fairly flew the rest of the way.

Ernestine was sitting on the beach, her legs tucked up under her dark blue skirt. In her arms was Marianne. She was looking down at the baby, a look of peace and contentment in her face. Gone was the wrinkled petulance. It was a face that was miraculously smoothed, happy, a face ten, fifteen years younger. She smiled up at me, her eyes were bright and sparkling. "You see," Ernestine said. "Lottie's been so very good. She hasn't wanted to play in the sand, or to get her feet wet. She's awake, but she's happy here just with me." Marianne rolled her dark brown eyes up at me and continued to suck industriously at her thumb.

I held out my arms.

"You aren't going to take her, are you?" asked Ernestine, a whisper of fright in her voice. She clasped Marianne tighter.

I bent down and put my hand on Marianne. "Ernestine, you've got to remember. This isn't Lottie. This is Marianne. She's *my* daughter." I held out my arms again.

Still Ernestine refused to yield her. "Give her to me," I said in a sterner tone.

Then Seward came limping up, panting slightly. "Be a good girl, Ernestine. Give her back to Nancy," he said gently.

Ernestine's eyes went from Seward to me. They had lost their brightness. Reluctantly, her arms shaking, she handed the baby to me. I clung to the warm little body of my child, hugging her so close she cried out in pain. I didn't care. She was safe. I had her back.

"You mustn't be too hard on Ernestine," Seward was saying. "She doesn't mean anything." I didn't reply. I didn't want to argue with him, not then. My baby was safe. Whether Ernestine meant harm or not did not matter for the moment.

But I knew that I would never leave her alone again. Never.

ELEVEN

Ernestine's escapade with Marianne forced me to reconsider my decision to stay at Wade House. Clearly I could not go on keeping a constant vigil over Marianne. Despite Seward's protestations that Ernestine had meant no harm I did not trust her. Hadn't I once overheard a discussion between Jeff and Seward about sending Ernestine away? Of course, Seward would never allow this. But perhaps she was dangerous?

Should I leave then? Going back home to Colton was more impossible than ever. When the baby was born I had offered to pay Mother's fare to come out and spend a week, so that she could see her step-grandchild. "Nancy, dear," she had written, "I simply *can't* get away. We have squeezed two more boys into your old bedroom and the house is overflowing. I am needed here." There was no hint in her letter of any real regret at not being able to come. The implication was that my invitation was sweet, but not as important to her as her duties as housemother to the Army. After that rebuff I resolved never again to ask anything of Mother.

And, too, I had very little money. I had only been able to save several hundred dollars—two hundred to be exact—out of my allowance. There was the expense of Mrs. Fowler, plus equipment and clothes for the baby. Maternity clothes and medicines had taken up the rest. I could not forget that monthly allowance, of course, would be cut off the minute I left Wade House.

At that point, I had to wait six and a half more months until I came into the inheritance. I was in doubt, still, about my right to it. Although as time went on I began to wonder if I weren't being unfair to Marianne. Shouldn't my child be entitled to that money, her father's money, no matter how he had died? Didn't *she* have the right to clothes, food, shelter, even if I had felt that the estate should not pay for mine?

So I went from day to day vacillating between indecision, determination, and back to indecision again. Then one rainy night something happened that put events in a new perspective. I was making up the formula for the baby in the kitchen. Marianne was sleeping peaceably nearby in her carriage, for I dared not leave her alone, even in our room. One of the Navy men, Berry I think his name was, came into the kitchen asking me to lend him a raincoat. "Left mine at the Station," he said. "It's pouring and I have to go out."

"Have you asked Mr. Townsend?" I said.

"He's in bed. At least I think he is. I can't find him around."

"I don't know. . . ." And then I remembered the old raincoat hanging in the closet that Tony had used the night of the shooting.

"Just a minute." I went into the closet. The coat was still there, spotted with caked mud, just as it had been when Tony had hung it up that fateful night. Apparently it had not been used since then. I looked at it with revulsion, forcing myself to take it off the hook. "You can have this," I said to Berry, shaking the coat out. "It isn't much, but you're welcome."

"Great," said Berry. "This will be fine, Mrs. Wade." He was very young, short, with a round boyish face, and closely clipped hair. He shrugged into the coat and buttoned it up. "Seems like once it starts to pour out here in sunny California, it never stops. Liquid sunshine," he laughed. He thrust his hands deep into the pockets, and suddenly, his face took on a startled expression. From the right pocket he slowly pulled out a gun. We both looked at it in amazement. It was a black gun, snub-nosed, the same gun I had held in my hand when Jeff and I had fought in the vestibule.

My body went stiff with shock. "It's a gun," Berry said stupidly, looking down at his hand. I was glad he didn't see my face, for I felt as if every drop of blood had drained from my body. And suddenly, it was as if my terrible dream had come true, the dream where I had shot Jeff and a mob of people were crowded about me, their fingers pointing, their voices accusing.

"I wonder what it's doing here," Berry said.

After what seemed a century I found my voice. "I—I don't know. The raincoat . . . it's an old one. It doesn't seem to

belong to anyone. . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say that it was Tony Wade who had last worn it.

Berry broke the gun open. "A twenty-five-caliber automatic. Loaded, too. Five"—he paused—"five blanks."

"Blanks?" I didn't understand. Could it have been the same gun? Berry had said it was a twenty-five-caliber automatic. Had Jeff called it that? It looked identical to the one I had found in the drawer.

"Yes, blanks. The gun's a mean little thing when it's got real bullets. But blanks. . . . Couldn't even stun a bedbug with them. Makes lots of noise . . . like firecrackers. But that's about all."

I was startled by a hissing noise behind me. I nearly fainted at the unexpected sound. I twitched my head around. The formula, a white frothing Niagara, was pouring down the sides of the pan. I grabbed at it and with a shaking hand, unmindful of my burnt fingers, switched the pan to the sink. The formula was ruined, but I was grateful for the small diversion. I stood with my back to Berry running water into the burnt pan. Blanks! You couldn't *kill* a man with blanks. Then that would mean . . . *I had not shot Jeff! I had not killed him.* Relief washed over me, relief so intense it left a film of perspiration on my forehead.

Berry said, "I'll be going. . . ."

"Yes. . . ." I turned to him.

"Hey, you all right?" He must have noticed my bloodless face, the way I leaned up against the sink, the beads of sweat on my brow.

"Yes," I answered. "It's—it's just so hot in here."

"Here's your gun." He held it out.

I couldn't touch it. "Put it on the table."

I had the insane desire to laugh, but I stood there, my hands clenched behind my back holding tightly to outward control. Very tightly. *I had not killed Jeff.*

"I'll return the coat first thing tomorrow," Berry said.

"No hurry."

"Well"—he gave me a curious look—"thanks, and good night."

"Good night."

When he had gone I sank gratefully into a chair. What did it mean? I had seen Jeff on the floor. There had been a hole—or had I *thought* it was a hole?—on the side of his head. But

the blood, I had seen the blood. Could a blank draw blood? What had Berry said? "Can't even stun a bedbug with them. . . ." No. The blood had been something else. Not the gun. For the first time since that awful night I went over every move I had made, consciously, rationally, from the time I had come down the stairs, Jeff hitting me, the struggle, the gun going off. Had he fallen right away? I squeezed my eyes shut trying so hard to remember. But it was no use.

Was it possible that Jeff hadn't been shot after all? Had he fallen in such a way that the breaking whiskey bottle had cut his face? Perhaps, as Tony had suggested, he had only been stunned, somehow he had managed to get to his feet and drunkenly wander off into the night. But he *looked* so death-like; the sickly olive mask of his face contrasting with the white marbled floor, his body stiff and unmoving.

Then it came to me that Jeff might have been shot, but by someone else with another gun. Who? Someone hiding in the shadows, someone unseen? I remembered again how Tony had opened the front door and came in from the rain-swept night. "What happened. . . ?" he had said. Had his surprise been genuine? He had seen Jeff's car, so that he had known Jeff was at home. Could he have watched us struggling, heard the gun go off?

Tony hadn't liked Jeff. That much had been obvious from the start. Jeff had inherited the bulk of their father's estate, and Tony did not try to hide his bitterness. But even now, with Jeff out of the way, Tony was not in line for the money. I was . . . and then Marianne.

I shook my head as if my thoughts, like rolling marbles, could fall into neat pockets. I recalled how Tony had led me into the kitchen that night, the brandy he had urged me to drink. His face had been strained, but he seemed outwardly calm. He had called the police, and then we had sat down to wait. Once he had left to go out into the storm, putting on the raincoat. "I'm going to see what I can do about that damn shutter," he had said. He was going to dismiss the jeep, also. How long had he been gone? Had he had the time to sneak around to the front and silently drag Jeff's body from the vestibule, down the path, and fling it over the cliff? I tried to remember and again I couldn't. And the gun. Had he slipped the gun into the raincoat pocket meaning to dispose of it later? That particular gun was loaded with blanks. A

gun with blanks found next to a man who had been shot would indicate that another gun, not the one I had held, had killed Jeff. Was that why Jeff's body had to be disposed of too? And Tony *knew* that Jeff had already been reported missing. He must have guessed that the police would scoff at the story of shooting a man who was already dead.

I got up and mechanically began to scrub the scorched pan. Marianne would be wanting her ten-thirty bottle in another half hour. But my mind could not focus on ounces of milk and sugar. My brain gnawed at my theory, a theory that refused to be neat and tidy. It did not seem plausible that Tony would be careless enough to leave the gun in the coat pocket. If he had to get rid of it he would have done a more thorough job, even if there were *two* guns he had to hide.

I remembered, then, Tony's nocturnal prowling in the garden, the flashlight stabbing the somber darkness under the trees. What had Tony been looking for? Had he forgotten where he had put that telltale gun loaded with blanks? Was he looking for that?

With unsteady hands I went about pouring the milk formula into a line of bottles. I spilled a lot of it. For while my own conscience was cleared, since the gun I had held had been useless, another person's possible guilt tore at my soul. Should I report my suspicions to the police? In my mind's eye I could see the short brisk figure of Captain Caldwell, hear his hard, staccato voice, "But Mrs. Wade, we've been through all of that. Jeffrey Wade's body was washed ashore. You know that. And we found no evidence of a fatal bullet wound." I would try to tell him that after two months of being in the water, with his face eaten away, it would be impossible to tell that Jeff had been shot. Then Captain Caldwell would say, "Well, and do you have the weapon that was used in this so-called shooting? Can you produce it, or any other *conclusive* evidence?" And Caldwell would have me there.

Perhaps it would be better for me to forget about it completely, I thought. Perhaps I should simply be grateful for the strange coincidence of the crash—and not try to reopen the case, for even if the evidence were more conclusive, could I point the finger at Tony, just to satisfy my own peace of mind? Could I drag this man through the muck of accused fratricide in the name of abstract justice? Could I? My feelings toward Tony were mixed. I was drawn to him, despite

his deep moodiness, his irascibility. Tony was so unlike his brother Jeff. Yet there was a similar undercurrent of restlessness, a magnetism, a pull that both fascinated and disturbed me.

It was a week later that Tony came home unexpectedly. His ship had been torpedoed and sunk and the survivors had been sent back to San Diego. Tony was one of the fortunates who had not suffered physically, but he looked dreadful. His eyes were sunken. He had lost weight, and his face was drawn to a honed thinness. There were hard white lines around his mouth. He said very little.

When he had been home two days, I found him in the study alone. He was sitting on the tufted sofa, a newspaper on his lap. He wasn't reading it. He was just staring straight ahead at nothing.

"Tony," I said, "I've wanted to talk to you."

He looked up at me, a flicker of pain came and went in his eyes. Of what was he thinking? Had he been reliving his last terrible days at sea? I had not the courage to ask.

"What is it?" he said.

"I don't like to bring the subject up . . . especially now . . . but . . ."

He sighed. "For heaven's sake, you don't have to treat me like an invalid. Speak your piece."

"I . . . uh . . . remember the gun I shot Jeff with?"

He gave a little start. "What of it?"

"I found it," I said.

He did not answer, but his eyes did not leave my face. I sat down beside him. "It was in the raincoat pocket. I lent the coat to Ensign Berry one night. He put his hand in the pocket and there it was."

"Are you sure it was the same gun?" he asked. His answer wasn't exactly what I expected. There was nothing about, "Well, I put it there," or "How did it get in the raincoat?"

"Yes."

"Where is it now?"

I reached down into the knitting bag I had been carrying and gave it to him. "It was loaded with blanks," I said.

He broke the gun open, just as Berry had done. "So they are," he said.

"Don't you see?" I cried. "I didn't do it! I didn't shoot Jeff."
"But someone did."

"You're sure? I thought maybe he might have just fallen. That blood on his face made by broken glass."

"No. There was a hole right in the side of his temple. That hole didn't look like broken glass."

"Then who?"

"These are blanks," he said, rolling the pellets around in his hand. "But can you be sure that one bullet, that first bullet, which hit Jeff, wasn't real?"

I hadn't thought of that possibility before. I didn't want to think of it now. It would mean that I had done it, that I was still guilty of killing Jeff. The bad dreams would return. I would have to take up that awful load of guilt again. "No," I said. "No, why would there be only one bullet that was deadly and the rest blanks? It doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't. But does Jeff's getting up and walking away make sense either? I'd almost stake my life on it—he was dead."

He replaced the blanks and handed me the gun. I shrank from it. "Don't you want it?" Tony asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Not even as a memento from Jeff?" He gave me a twisted smile.

When I said nothing he went on, "Miss him?"

"Yes . . . yes . . . I suppose . . . oh, I don't know," I stumbled. The truth was I didn't. Our marriage had been so brief, and except for the first weeks, a source of unhappiness. If it weren't for his manner of dying, I might have already forgotten him. But it was hard to give Tony the smug satisfaction I knew would be his if I confessed this.

"You never did tell me why you married him," he said.

"I thought I did. I thought I told you I loved him."

"Oh, yes. I seem to recall that you hinted at something like that. You loved him." The last was stated in a mocking tone. He put the gun in his pocket and laid one arm across the back of the sofa. His eyes were suddenly intense. "What do you know about love, Nancy? You, with your scuffed saddle shoes, cardigan sweaters, and romantic poetry. Huh? What do you know about life, for that matter. About men?"

I felt the red flushing hot on my cheeks. He still had his arm thrown back of me across the sofa. I could feel the near-

ness of him, the warmth. His face was close to mine. If he touches me, I thought, I'll get up and leave. And yet, God knows why, I wanted him to.

"I don't see why it's any of your business," I replied stiffly. The words were lame, childish. Why couldn't I have said something flip, something withering? Instead my heart beat in quick funny jerks.

He didn't touch me. He laughed instead. "Go on, run along. Forget about the gun. Forget about Jeff. I've seen too many good men die, really *good* people, who could have been of some use to the world—unselfish, courageous. They were cut down in senseless butchery. Jeff wasn't one of that noble breed. If you're frank with yourself, you'll realize he was just a self-centered bum."

I got up with knees that felt like straw. I couldn't answer. There wasn't any kind of reply I could make to those bitter, scouring words.

"And Nancy," he called as I went to the door.

"Yes?"

"You haven't mentioned this gun to anyone else, have you?"

"No," I said.

"Well . . . don't." His eyes were hard and serious. "If I were you I wouldn't say a word."

TWELVE

It was shortly after my conversation with Tony that I began to feel unwell. It wasn't anything I could definitely put my finger on, but a general malaise, a dragging fatigue that seemed to deaden my limbs. There was a dull, constant ache behind my eyes, and I found that my body quivered at the least exertion. I was sleeping badly, sometimes awakening around midnight and not being able to fall asleep again until three, four in the morning. Then I would have to rouse myself at five, for Marianne was a predawn riser.

My apprehensiveness for Marianne didn't help. It wasn't easy keeping the baby out of Ernestine's or Mrs. Kingsley's reach in a tactful way. My nerves would scream each time either woman approached her. Ernestine was the more persistent of the two. She would coax to dress the baby, to help me bathe her, or to walk her in the carriage. I could understand now the full maternal passion with which a cat would claw or tear at a stranger who approached her kittens. I was like that, inside.

One day I left Marianne in the carriage on the lawn while I dashed upstairs to get a sweater. When I got back, to my horror, Ernestine was holding the baby. I threw diplomacy to the winds and pounced upon her. "Give the baby to me," I demanded, yanking at her arm. She refused. I shook her so that Marianne began to cry. Ernestine released her then, her face turning an unhealthy, blotchy red. "You can't have her," I said. "I don't want anyone to hold her."

Ernestine's face screwed up and she began to cry, loud, uncontrollable sobs. "I want her! I want her!"

"No! You can't have her," I said, as if I were scolding a child. Then, like that child, Ernestine threw herself upon the ground in front of my astonished eyes, tearing at the grass and screaming over and over, "I want her! I want her!" It was a

full-sized tantrum. "I'll hold my breath. I'll kill myself," she threatened. It was a horrible thing to see a full-grown woman thrashing about at my feet. She paused for a moment to look up at me to gauge the effect. But I shook my head. Then she went back to screaming again.

It brought Seward on a limping run from the house. He gave me a withering look and picked Ernestine up. He folded her in his arms where she continued to sob upon his breast. "What happened?" he asked. I told him. "Ernestine loves Marianne. She wouldn't hurt the child," he said.

"Wouldn't she? After what I just saw I'm not too sure."

"It's just a—a childish fit," he said. "She hasn't had one of those in years. It doesn't mean that she would do anything harmful to the baby."

"No. And what about Lottie?"

He stared at me with narrowed inky-blue eyes. "What *about* Lottie?"

"She didn't die accidentally, did she?" The words were out, the undisclosed conviction I had carried so long deep inside me.

"And just what do you mean by that statement?" Seward asked. Ernestine's face was still hidden in his shirt front, but suddenly she became very still. "Who's been talking to you?"

"Mrs. Kingsley," I said.

"I wouldn't believe a word that woman says. Listen to me. Ernestine wouldn't hurt a living soul. Do you understand? Not a living soul." He put his arm around Ernestine and took her into the house.

Of course, Seward would protect Ernestine, I told myself. He was devoted to her, her slave. Yet, suppose there were some truth in what he had said? Ernestine was so fragile, so small, and almost always gentle. Actually, I had never known her to be unkind to Marianne. Had I misjudged her?

I brought myself up short. Was I right to be lulled into such complacency? I had just witnessed the full fury of her temper, frail as she was. I didn't really know how deranged Ernestine was. To what excesses would she go? I wasn't sure. And I wasn't going to take the chance of finding out.

That night after my first heavy sleep of a few hours I awoke and tossed and turned until morning. At five Marianne, true to schedule, awoke, demanding to be fed. I crawled out of my warm bed shivering in the dark. Drugged with sleep-

lessness, sore with fatigue, I changed her. Then I went out into the black hall and switched on the feeble landing light. This was the moment I hated most. The house slept with a secret, sly quietness. The shadows on the stairs, magnified, grotesque, seemed to beckon to me. I hated that trip to the kitchen each morning.

Halfway down the stairs I realized I had forgotten my slippers. I turned and my robe brushed against something. I arched my neck back and in the dim light, to my horror, I saw that a string had been tied tautly across the stairs from carved spindle post on one side to the post on the other. If I had gone on I would have tripped on it and tumbled on down the stairs to the hard stony floor below. I held on to the railing with rigid hands and stared hard at the descending stairs and the floor below, the vestibule floor where Jeff had once lain. I could have easily been killed.

On legs of sawdust I climbed back up the stairs. I fumbled for the knob of the door to my room. The baby was crying. She was hungry. Numbly, like a sleepwalker I picked her up, and carried her back and forth, back and forth.

Someone had tied that string there. Someone who knew my habits, someone who had wanted me to fall. But who and why? Only yesterday at the dinner table, I had complained about having to get up in the semi-dark. They had all been there: Seward, Ernestine, Mrs. Kingsley, Tony. Any one of them could have put the string there. I was surrounded by enemies, people I couldn't trust. I would have stumbled, there would have been a scream, people running from their rooms and in the confusion the string silently, surreptitiously untied.

As I paced to and fro, Marianne became quiet. Then a slow burning anger began to take the place of fear. Anger against Wade House and everyone in it. Mrs. Kingsley hated me. Ernestine wanted my baby. Seward was angry because I had been cruel to Ernestine. Tony was bitter, and I believed he secretly felt that I had married Jeff for his money, and, perhaps, that I had killed him for it, too.

Well, what was keeping me at Wade House then? A heated stubbornness I never knew I possessed, fanned by anger, burned in me. They would find out, I told myself, that I wasn't quite the mouse they thought. No, I wasn't the same Nancy Davenport who had first entered Wade House, cringing at

every word, submitting to every reproof and insult. Besides there was the matter of five million dollars. Oh, yes, little naïve Nancy had come a long way. That money, even if there remained a small doubt as to whether it was rightfully mine, belonged to Marianne. She was entitled to it.

For the time being I decided to say nothing about the string on the staircase. I wanted to watch and see. Whoever it was would give himself away again. There was danger in that approach, but I was still mad enough to be willing to take the risk. Not that it was all that easy walking about, going through the routine of eating, tending the baby, feeding her, taking my usual walk, knowing all the while that someone would gladly see me dead.

Two days went by. Nothing happened. Once I found myself on the verge of telling Tony. But I thought better of it. What if he were the one? After all, he would stand to gain if I and Marianne were out of the way. Hadn't Mr. Anderson said that the money would go to Tony and his mother if Jeff left no legal heirs? No, I couldn't confide in him. I couldn't trust him.

My health did not improve. In fact, it worsened. There were mornings when I could hardly make it out of bed. "You look rotten," Tony said to me one evening. "Why don't you see a doctor?" We were having an after dinner liqueur. Kahalua it was. One of the Navy boys had given Mrs. Kingsley several bottles of it before he was shipped out. She didn't care for it herself, but the rest of us had a small glass each evening.

"What's the matter with Nancy?" asked Ernestine. "Why does she have to see a doctor?" She had quite forgotten the scene on the lawn. To my dismay she had resumed her pleading to hold the baby, despite rebuffs and frank refusal on my part.

"I haven't been sleeping well," I said.

Mrs. Kingsley looked at me with disdain. "You don't get enough exercise, that's your trouble. If you had to make up a half-dozen beds each morning, vacuum the stairs, get the meals, and I don't know what all, you'd be tired enough at the end of the day. I sleep like a top."

"I get plenty of exercise. I have Marianne to look after.

"And I must walk a couple of miles when I take her out for her airing. It's not lack of exercise."

"Then what is it?" She sugared her coffee generously and began to stir it.

"Nerves, I guess."

"Nerves? What's a young girl like you nervous about? When I was your age, there wasn't a thing that could rattle me. Nothing."

"Is there now?" I asked pointedly.

"Heavens, no. I haven't a thing on my conscience."

I gave her a sharp look. What did she mean by that? But her dark gypsy features were impenetrable.

I took Tony's advice and went to see Dr. Davis. He was booked up solid for two weeks, but at my insistence the nurse said that I might come in the following day toward closing time if I didn't mind waiting. Tony drove me in. I brought Marianne with me even though Ernestine had promised tearfully that she would "take good care" of the baby while I was gone. The doctor's anteroom was overflowing with waiting patients. The minutes dragged, stretching my nerves to a taut humming wire. When it seemed that I could not bear another moment of waiting, the nurse came out, starched and fresh, and beckoned to me.

Dr. Davis looked more in need of medical attention than I did. His spare figure was crumpled, stooped, spent. Even his voice held weariness. I gave him a brief history of my complaints. While the nurse held Marianne, he examined me, poking and prodding, and finally searching my mouth with his pencil flashlight.

"Been using any ointments of any type?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Eyedrops?"

"No."

"Strange . . . very strange. How's about mouthwash?"

"Well, yes. I have this awful taste in my mouth all the time. I use it several times a day."

"Hmmm. D'you know what kind it is?"

I named a popular brand.

"Been swallowing it?"

"No. It's not very tasty." What did mouthwash have to do with it?

He didn't say anything for a minute or two. Then, "Some-

times we don't notice, but we do swallow or take things we aren't aware of."

"I think I'd be aware of it."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He tapped a pencil on his teeth.

"What is it, Doctor? What do I have?"

"Near as I can figure, except for a generally run down condition that sometimes follows the birth of a baby, you've got a case of chronic mercury poisoning."

"Mercury *what?*" An electric jolt of fear flashed through me.

"Poisoning. That's why I asked about the mouthwash. Sometimes it contains mercury bichloride. In small amounts of course. But if you were imbibing an appreciable quantity . . . that would be different."

"I haven't. At least I haven't been aware of it. Why are you so sure it's mercury?"

"I'm not one hundred percent sure. Your loss of weight, muscular weakness could be put down to general fatigue. But you also have the characteristic blue line on your gums near the teeth. That's a classical symptom of mercury."

I put my hand to my mouth in an involuntary gesture. A classical symptom. Of poison. First the string, now the poison. "Is it . . . is it serious?" I asked, wanting to say, "Is it fatal?" Dr. Davis' explanation that I had swallowed too much mouthwash I didn't accept for a moment.

"No. I don't think so. You seem to have a mild case. Maybe if you had gone on in this way for some time it might have turned into something more serious."

"Isn't it a little unusual, I mean, mercury poisoning?"

"We have cases of it from time to time. There are quite a few remedies that contain mercury. Children *will* get into those. Disinfectants for one, eyedrops, for another."

"Eyedrops?"

"Yes. It is sometimes used in the treatment of conjunctivitis."

I thought of Ernestine and her red-rimmed eyes. Conjunctivitis? Did she use eyedrops, eyedrops that contained mercury?

"Wouldn't it have a definite taste?" I asked. Dr. Davis gave me a curious look. It was the kind of look one would give to a person whose mental abilities or stability was in doubt. "Not always. But then, kids will eat or drink the vilest concoctions, especially if it is forbidden."

It wasn't children I was worried about, it was myself, I wanted to say. Was somebody slipping a "remedy" into my food? But we all ate the same thing. Only the Kahalua liqueur. Mrs. Kingsley never drank that. I had the impulse to tell Dr. Davis of my suspicion. But I felt that he had already tagged me as an overly anxious person. Besides, what proof did I have? Would I sound neurotic, persecuted? Probably.

"I suggest you leave off the mouthwash," he was saying. "Drink plenty of water. Get some rest. I'll prescribe a mild sleeping pill. That ought to help. Some vitamins to build you up. And, for heaven's sake, don't worry so much."

Don't worry. I wanted to laugh. Someone was trying to kill me, and he said, "Don't worry."

On the way home I told Tony what the doctor had said. "Too much mouthwash?" was his only comment. If I had thought that the news would shock him, I was wrong. He hardly seemed to have heard at all. His features were impassive. He did not show even a flicker of interest. He had sunk into one of his silent brooding moods, and we did not speak for the rest of the way.

I did not drink any more Kahalua. But it was impossible not to eat. I would invent all sorts of excuses to get my own meals. This was easy for breakfast and lunch. The evening meal was a different matter. I managed to get around that by insisting on helping Mrs. Kingsley dish out the food and serve it. It seemed preposterous that Mrs. Kingsley would dislike me enough to poison me, but I wasn't taking any chances.

Gradually I began to feel better. And with the improvement of my health I began to take a more rational view of things. Why would anyone want me dead? The inheritance? But if Marianne and I left Wade House I would forfeit the money anyway. Perhaps that was it. If it were Tony, all he would have to do would be to *scare* me enough, and like a rabbit I would turn tail and run. The string across the stairs would not necessarily have been fatal, nor the mercury. But they would have been enough to frighten even a more complacent, sturdier person than myself. And there might be other scares. Nothing more. Well, Tony (and he was the most logical one where the money was concerned) could scare all he liked. That stubborn, new streak asserted itself. I was going to stay.

THIRTEEN

Tony decided to go on a fishing trip in the Colorado mountains the last week of his leave. It was while he was gone that I had a curious conversation with Mrs. Kingsley. It took place in the kitchen. She was shelling peas and I was preparing the ubiquitous formula for Marianne.

I was hurrying through my chore so that I could finish and leave. Conversation between us had been strained and forced. In my haste I dropped and broke a bottle. Mrs. Kingsley went on calmly shelling peas while I got a broom and started sweeping up the mess.

"Nervous?" asked Mrs. Kingsley.

"Not especially," I said, taking a firmer grip on the dustpan. Mrs. Kingsley took perverse pleasure in picking out my disabilities.

"Seems like you need a rest," she said.

"Why?" I asked. She was critical of me, but never really concerned, unless there was a reason behind it. I waited now for the reason.

"You're all jittery. Not too bad the last couple of days, but still full of nerves. By the way, what did the doctor say was your trouble?"

"Mercury poisoning," I said, looking her full in the face.

She raised her penciled arched brows. "Poisoning? You're fooling?"

"No. I'm not."

"Why would the doctor say a thing like that, unless he was fishing around and didn't really know?"

"I think he knew. I don't believe he'd pull something like that out of the air."

She split another pod. "Sometimes doctors will tell you anything just to get rid of you. They give you a pill and let it go at that. You're just overworked, tired, that's all. You ought to get away. Take yourself a long vacation."

"It's pretty hard to get away on a vacation with a baby," I countered. "There's diapers, bottles, making a formula. . . ."

"Leave the baby with me," she said, nonchalantly popping a handful of peas into her mouth.

"With you?"

"Why not? It won't be the first time I took care of a baby."

"I'm sure it won't. But I don't feel I could leave."

"I'm serious, Nancy."

I gave her a long look. She meant it. She wanted me to go away and leave Marianne with her. The idea was deeply disturbing. "You wouldn't want to get rid of me," I said boldly.

"No. Why? Why would I want to do that?"

That was it. Why? She didn't like me, she wanted Marianne because she reminded her of Jeff. Was that the reason?

Mrs. Kingsley had come to the last of the peas and set her bowl upon the table. "I've got to call the butcher about the chicken. And Nancy, think it over—about the vacation, I mean."

I went into the walk-in pantry where I kept a supply of bottles. I needed one to replace the bottle I had broken. I climbed the step stool searching for them. But something else caught my eye. Twinkling under the dim bulb light was a tiny vial with an eyedrop stopper. I picked it up. There was a skull and cross bones on the label. It read, "Three drops, twice a day in each eye. Caution: do not use internally." I stared at it for a long time. "Eyedrops," Dr. Davis had said. "They sometimes contain mercury bichloride. Children will get into them." Children and poisoners.

Mechanically, like some automated robot, I got down from the stool, the vial still in my hand. How had it come to the pantry shelf? Mrs. Kingsley?

Suddenly her urging me to leave took on a new, sinister meaning. Had she been trying to *poison* me? Her light dismissal of Dr. Davis' diagnosis meant nothing. But why should she take such drastic measures? Did she think she could send me away, separate me from Marianne? Ernestine, I knew, was unbalanced. Was Mrs. Kingsley unbalanced too?

It came to me again that it was foolhardy to stay on at Wade House. Not with *two* crazy women. And yet the time was getting closer to the day when I would come into the Wade inheritance. It wasn't the five million dollars—five

thousand would have done as well—but what the money could do for Marianne and me. We would be independent, free. I could live wherever I chose, wherever I wanted. I would not have to worry about illness, about finding a job, about asking my stepmother for help. The money was getting harder and harder to give up when, now, there were only a few weeks left.

It was true that finding the vial in the pantry had terrified me and set me to thinking about Mrs. Kingsley as never before. How much did I really know about her? I had already discussed her with Seward, to very little satisfaction. Maybe Tony could tell me more.

I waited anxiously for Tony to return from his trip. He came on a warm March day while I was resting on the bed with shades drawn. I heard his step outside in the hall and the clanking of his fishing gear. I followed him up to the atticlike cupola where he was stowing his equipment away. It was an airless, oval-shaped room, smelling of sun-heated dust, and walled with ten long, narrow windows. They had cracked yellow shades, each pulled its length and each with a dingy, fringed tassel. The light came in dim and watery, rippling and spreading over old trunks, discarded wooden chairs, a marble washstand, an armless clothes dummy, and several beaded mushroom lamps.

"How'd you find me?" Tony asked.

"I followed you," I said. "I wanted to see you alone."

"Did you?" I could have sworn he leered at me. But the light was against his back and it was hard to tell.

"Yes. I wanted to ask you about Mrs. Kingsley."

"What about her?"

"Remember my telling you that Dr. Davis diagnosed my condition as mercury poisoning?"

"I got the impression he wasn't sure."

"Sure as he could be. I found a bottle of eyedrops in the pantry. Eyedrops, Dr. Davis told me, sometimes contain mercury bichloride."

Tony said, "Mother uses eyedrops. She's so absent-minded she could have left them in the pantry. I don't see what that has to do with Mrs. Kingsley."

"She's never liked me. She doesn't now. I thought she might have suspected that I had something to do with Jeff's death."

"I'm sure she doesn't. If she did, you'd know it. She isn't the type to keep something like that to herself."

"Still, I wouldn't put it past her to sprinkle a few drops of that nasty stuff on my food."

"Possibly," he said in a studied off-hand manner that rang false.

It gave me a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had expected him to deny it vehemently. I went on, "She'd be happier if I wasn't at Wade House. She's even suggested I leave."

His eyebrows lifted. "When was this?"

"Yesterday. She told me I needed a vacation. That I ought to leave Marianne with her and go off somewhere."

"Are you?"

"No. But I can't figure out why she should say such a thing. I'm not fooling myself that she is all that worried about the state of my health."

He didn't say anything for a minute. Then he sat down on one of the trunks and took out a cigarette. "Sit down, Nancy." He patted a place beside him. "There's something I think I ought to tell you."

I sat down beside him and that queer feeling in my stomach reached out and squeezed at my heart.

"I suppose," he said lighting his cigarette, "I might as well tell you how Mrs. Kingsley fits into the Wade pattern. I didn't know for sure until this past week, although I think I've always had a hunch."

"About what?"

"About Mrs. Kingsley. She came to work for us as a maid when I was very small. She was young then, very pretty in a wild sort of way. If there was a Mr. Kingsley she never mentioned him. At that time we had several servants, maids, a chauffeur, gardeners, and we had a housekeeper, too. Not Mrs. Kingsley. I don't remember much about that other one, except that she always smelled of rose water and wore a long green apron. One day she simply wasn't there. Later I learned that Mrs. Kingsley had caught her stealing; whether it was money, butter, or the china, I didn't know. But Mrs. Kingsley became our housekeeper after that. I have always suspected that Mrs. Kingsley had her predecessor fired on some trumped-up charge. Mrs. Kingsley was, and is, that kind of woman. But she was efficient. I'll give her credit for that. "There was no interruption in our routine; she kept the other

servants toeing the line. They hated her and feared her, too. She and father used to go over the accounts every night in the study. Sometimes when I got out of bed in the middle of the night to come down to get a drink of water, I could see the light under the door. I didn't realize then how strange it was for household accounts to take up so much of their time. In a vague sort of childish way, I might have guessed that their relationship was more than just housekeeper and master of the house, but I doubt it. Hindsight may have made me more precocious than I was.

"I was eight years old when Lottie was drowned. I was old enough, then, to appreciate a younger sister. She took after mother's side of the family. Light-skinned, flaxen hair, gray-blue, changeling eyes. The thought of her struggling for breath while the sea filled her lungs was a horror to me. For a long time afterward I would awaken screaming, seeing her blonde hair floating out from her face submerged under the green waves.

"You know, of course, that Lottie was never found. Although the tragedy was not talked about in my presence, I was a great one for eavesdropping, skulking around corners and listening to grown-up conversations. In a dim sort of way I gathered that Mother had been responsible for Lottie's death."

"How?" I asked.

He ground his cigarette out on a dusty abalone shell. "Negligence, carelessness, I suppose. Mother was never a responsible person.

"Six months after Lottie's death," he went on, "Jeff was born. I had always been rather close to my father, but after the birth of Jeff things changed. Jeff was the darling of the household. Maybe, in retrospect, I exaggerate. I know that a new baby coming into a family becomes the center of attraction and that the other kids are shunted aside. But to me it seemed that Jeff got far more than his share of love and affection, especially from Mrs. Kingsley and Father.

"Then when Jeff was three years old Father died. Heart, I think. It was a terrible blow. I was old enough by then to understand the terms of the will, which was read to us, old-fashioned style, in the study by Mr. Anderson's aged uncle. Jeff was to get the bulk of my father's money which would come to him when he was twenty-five.

"This was one more sign, one more proof, and the ultimate one, that my father preferred Jeff to me. I was entering adolescence, never an easy age, and the terms of the will embittered me. No one wanted me. They didn't care. My mother was lost in her morbid dream world with Lottie, Mrs. Kingsley ignored me, and my father, even in death, had forsaken me. Twice I ran away from home. Finally, with the help of Cousin Seward, a school was picked out for me and I was sent away. Oh, I came home for vacations, summers, but as I grew older I'd find other places to go. I didn't like coming back to Wade House. I never got along with Jeff. He was spoiled, willful; the household revolved around him. I couldn't forgive Mother for falling in line with Mrs. Kingsley. It was only later—to tell you the truth, it wasn't until a year ago—that I began to realize Mother's true mental condition; and how pathetic she really was. My bitterness mellowed. And when I was stationed out here, I decided to live at home, and try to make up to Mother for my neglect of her through the years. I saw the situation in a different light. Many things that I had taken for granted began to puzzle me. Mrs. Kingsley's ascendancy over the household, for one. Not even Seward would stand up to her, especially when it came to Mother, whom he adores."

"I wondered about that, too," I said.

"What?"

"Mrs. Kingsley. And why Seward, who is always so protective of your mother, should sit by when Mrs. Kingsley tears into her."

"Yes. But it wasn't only that that seemed odd. It was Mrs. Kingsley's fierce possessiveness when it came to Jeff. I realized that she had raised him from babyhood on. But she seemed to be overdoing it.

"Then one day I was going through some papers when I happened on an old birth certificate of Jeff's. I always knew that he was born in Colorado, but suddenly it struck me as strange that Mother should go away to have Jeff, when both Lottie and I were born in San Diego.

"I won't go into all the details of my mental processes. To make a long story short, last week I went up to that Colorado nursing home where Jeff was born."

"You didn't go fishing?" I asked.

"I fished all right. I fished for information. Jeff was born to

a Mrs. Alec Wade the records showed. It seemed that my trip had been for nothing. I was about to leave, when the woman in charge, an elderly *grande dame* with a bulbous nose, said something that stopped me in my tracks. 'I remember Mrs. Wade myself,' she said. 'She was such a beautiful woman, so vivacious, so gay. She had her baby easily, without any fuss at all.'

"I asked her if she could remember anything else about what she had looked like, and she replied, 'Yes, I can. An unusual type. Very dark, gypsy looking.'"

"Mrs. Kingsley!" I gasped.

"Yes, Mrs. Kingsley. Jeff's mother." Tony gave me a half-twisted smile. "Funny, all these years, I might have guessed. My father was something of a gay blade from stories that have come to me. I should have put two and two together."

"Have you told her . . . I mean, Mrs. Kingsley? Does she know that you know?"

"Yes, I spoke to her last night. She denied it at first. Then when I said that I had gone to Colorado to find out, she admitted it. Admitted it? She bragged. She said that my father would have divorced my mother and married her if it weren't for the money."

"Money? I don't understand. I thought your father was wealthy."

"He was. But not until after he married my mother. When they married, my mother's family loaned my father a half million dollars. The loan was to have been recalled if he left my mother. That half million dollars was the basis of father's later fortune. He wasn't about to give it up. Even for Mrs. Bella Kingsley."

"But he left most of it to Jeff anyway."

"He had to do *something*. She had him over a barrel. Threatened to tell his family. He compromised. Said he'd leave most of his money to Jeff and raise him as his son. I suppose when Jeff came along, the spitting image of himself, he wasn't sorry he'd made the bargain."

"How did your father ever get your mother to go along with such a scheme?"

"Mother was never too bright. I imagine after Lottie's death she must have been pretty addled. And Jeff was born six months later."

So Jeff was Mrs. Kingsley's son. Slowly the impact of that

simple fact hit me. "Then," I said, "Marianne is Mrs. Kingsley's granddaughter. If something should happen to me. . . ." I couldn't finish. I remembered Mrs. Kingsley's solicitude about my pregnancy. But that was *after* Jeff was killed. Before then she had been scornful, hateful. And just recently she had suggested that I leave Marianne and go away on a vacation. How easy it would have been for her to trump up some story that I had abandoned my own daughter. *Her* granddaughter.

And what of the string on the stairs? The poison. Was that Mrs. Kingsley's work, too?

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Tony said, as if reading my thoughts.

"How can you be sure?"

"I've already warned Mrs. Kingsley."

"There was something else, though, Tony. Something besides the poison. I never told you, or anyone else about it. But when I came down the stairs very early one morning there was a string tied across the staircase."

"A string? Of all the stupid, low-down tricks. You think that might have been Mrs. Kingsley?"

"In the light of what you've told me, I guess so."

He was thoughtful a moment. "If it was her, I doubt if she'll try anything like that again. I gave Mrs. Kingsley to understand that I've written a letter to the lawyers to be opened in case of your death. Anderson and company are unaware of Jeff's true parentage. In case anything should happen to you the letter will explain everything and point the finger at Mrs. Kingsley."

"What did she say when you told her about it?"

"She laughed. She said that I had as good a reason for getting you out of the way as she did."

"But Marianne inherits everything if anything should happen to me. As far as you're concerned, my death wouldn't mean much."

"I told her that. But she said, 'It'd be simple as pie to murder a baby. A pillow over her head. . . so many die by smothering. . . .'"

I shuddered. "Don't," I said, "I don't want to hear any more." The picture was too horrible.

Tony kept watching me closely. He said, "You don't believe Mrs. Kingsley, do you? You don't think for a minute that I would contemplate such a thing?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't tell him that I had already suspected him. I couldn't reveal how uncertain I was about his part in Jeff's death. And had he really gotten over his bitterness toward his father for giving Jeff the bulk of his fortune? Tony was the eldest son. By right the money should have been his. People did evil things for a lot less money. Nice people.

"I—I . . . I guess not," I lied.

We were sitting close together on a packing case. He suddenly put his arm around me. There was a funny smile in his eyes. "What you need is a protector," he said.

I did not move. I sat there like a frozen thing, but my heart was beating wildly. "Don't you think that would be a good idea?" He drew my stiff, resisting body closer. "You could marry me. I wouldn't have any reason for throwing you down the stairs and breaking that foolish neck of yours." He reached up and ran his finger along my throat and I shivered.

"Let me go, Tony," I said in a terrified whisper I hardly recognized as mine. His grip tightened. "Still thinking of Jeff?"

I shook my head in the negative.

"Maybe this will make you forget," he said. And he kissed me. I did not think of Jeff. I did not think of anything at all. I was lost in some kind of strange, wild world. I was an autumn leaf whipped by the wind, dashing, whirling through the high, high air.

Suddenly my true relationship to this man jolted me back to reality. Tony might be my enemy. Tony was kissing me. With a violent motion, I jerked myself free. "Don't do that. Not ever again."

"Why not? Still Jeff. You know I can't help wondering," he said bluntly, "if he didn't marry you because he couldn't have you any other way?"

I slapped him then with the flat of my hand. It was an automatic reflex, without any thought behind it. It made a sharp cracking sound. And I was sorry the minute my lashing hand touched his face. For me it was a demeaning thing to do, degrading. Almost sordid.

Tony did not get angry. He laughed. A mocking laugh. I ran from the room, his laughter pursuing me through the door.

FOURTEEN

I ran all the way down the stairs from the cupola to my room. I slammed the door behind me, and threw myself on the bed. I closed my eyes tightly, but Tony's face and Tony's words kept coming back to me. Had he lied about Mrs. Kingsley? Had he made up that story about her being Jeff's mother, Marianne's grandmother?

Little things kept coming back to me: the way Mrs. Kingsley had taken an interest in me after Jeff had died, how she had gloated over Marianne when she first had seen her. "Why don't you take a vacation?" she had said. Go away, was what she had wanted to say, go away and leave Marianne with me.

I had already suspected Mrs. Kingsley of trying to separate me from Marianne. In the past I had believed that it was because Marianne was Jeff's daughter. But what if it were really as Tony had told me? If she was tied to Marianne by bonds of blood, and with a sizable fortune in the offing—what then? How far would she go in disposing of me?

I turned over on my back with a groan. I was afraid. I had always feared Mrs. Kingsley. She was such a clever woman. Intrigue, subterfuge, malice were easy for her. She was a woman of strong passion but clear head. Dangerous. I had no doubt that she had maneuvered that long-ago housekeeper out of her position in the Wade household. She had probably hooked Alec Wade with the same cunning. Her hold over poor befuddled Ernestine had been easier yet.

But why did Seward fall in line so meekly? That was the puzzler. He did not seem the type at all. It probably hinged on Lottie's death. There was something about that drowning, something vague and unexplained that bothered me. "Carelessness," Tony had said. But even the most astute and capable of mothers had been known to turn their backs for a moment only to have their children meet with disaster. No,

carelessness couldn't explain the weird silences, the stiffening reactions that came whenever Lottie's name was mentioned.

What had really happened? Had anyone actually seen Lottie go into the water? There were three persons who were home that tragic day, Mrs. Kingsley, Ernestine, and the nurse, Mrs. Blount. Seward had been due for a visit, but hadn't arrived. Alec, Tony, and the servants, from what I understood, were gone. And then afterward there was the dismissal of Mrs. Blount. True, since Lottie was no longer there, Mrs. Blount's services were no longer needed. But were there other reasons for her hasty departure?

My curiosity nagged persistently at me. If I could only see and talk to Mrs. Blount. Some instinct told me that she held the key to the mystery.

I decided to approach Seward on the subject of Mrs. Blount, but in a roundabout way. He would close up like a clam, as he had done before, if he knew I was openly curious. Dissemblance was not my forte so that when I approached Seward in the garden the next day it was with an inner nervousness.

He was down on his hands and knees weeding the daisy bed. "Seems like it'd be more sensible to take out the daisies and leave the crabgrass," he said as I watched him for a few moments. His hands were fine, but strong, as he dug into the black, loamy dirt.

"You ought to have help," I commiserated.

"From who?" His sunburned face crinkled up at me in a smile.

"If I weren't so lazy I'd give you a hand," I said laughing.

He got to his feet and rubbed his lame knee. "You've got the baby. That's a full-time job and then some."

"I guess so," I said. "I tried to get Mrs. Fowler to come back, but she's busy, cases lined up for the next six months."

"Shortages, shortages," he said, brushing dirt from his trousers. "Shortages in everything but babies. I read in the paper last night where they're having a 'baby boom.' Why don't you try someone else?"

"That's just it. She was the only one that Dr. Davis would recommend. I don't know anyone else. Do you?"

He shook his head. "No."

"I was thinking, Seward. I remember Mrs. Kingsley saying that a Mrs. Blount once worked for the Wades. . . ." I could feel him stiffen, but I went on, "Do you think she might——?"

"She'd be too old," he interrupted bluntly.

"I thought maybe . . . she might know of someone——"

"I hardly think so," he said. "I understand she died a few years ago." He did not meet my eyes. Was it because he didn't want to rake up old memories? Or was it something else?

On a hunch I looked up the Blounts in the telephone directory. There were three of them. One was a Mrs. Tessie Blount. I wasn't sure if it was the same one, yet I did not want to call her on the telephone. Someone might overhear me. If Seward had been lying about her death, then there was a strong reason why he didn't want me to contact her. I decided I would pay this Mrs. Blount a personal visit, even if it might turn out to be a wild goose chase.

When I got out the city map I saw that the address was somewhere in East San Diego. It would be a long bus ride and, of course, I would have to take Marianne with me. But, by now, my curiosity had resolved itself into a burning desire to know.

I met Seward on the stairs as I was leaving.

"I'm taking Marianne into town for shoes," I said fussing with her bonnet.

"Let me drive you in," he offered.

For a horrible moment I felt trapped. "I wouldn't think of troubling you."

"No trouble."

"Thanks, Seward . . . but you see . . . well, Marianne has never been on a *real* bus"—was my tone too eager, too false?—"and I sort of thought it might be a different kind of outing for us. Besides you have your gas-ration stamps to think of. I heard you say just the other day that you were running low." I knew that I was babbling, but I could not let him suspect where I was going.

"There go those shortages again," he smiled. "I won't insist. But I *will* drive you to the bus stop."

It took longer than I had thought riding the bus out to East San Diego. I had to transfer buses at the Plaza downtown and nearly lost Marianne's sweater in the crush. We finally shoved our way into Number 52, which some kind

man assured me would take me to my destination. As we skirted Balboa Park, leaving the center of the city, the passengers thinned out, and by the time we reached Crestline Avenue, the street given in the directory, Marianne, I, and an old woman with a shopping bag were the only ones left on the bus.

When I finally found the house, a little unpainted frame bungalow almost hidden by masses of pink oleander, Marianne was like a sack of cement in my arms. I knocked and knocked on the door, while a huge orange tomcat circled in and out of my legs. At last, to my relief, the door was opened a crack. A pair of beady gray eyes looked out. "Yes?"

"Are you Mrs. Tessie Blount?"

"Yes. What'd you want?" The voice and the eyes were suspicious.

"I understand you are a children's nurse," I said, hoisting Marianne to the other shoulder. "I'm looking——"

"I'm retired now. I don't do that work anymore." It was the right Tessie Blount. There couldn't have been two children's nurses with that same name. Still the door remained open only a few inches.

"Oh," I said, putting a false disappointment and my real weariness in that word. "I've come all the way from Point Lobas to talk to you."

"Who sent you?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Nobody sent me. I've heard about you. I understand you are very good. And I've had such a time. . . ."

"Who'd you hear it from?"

"Mrs. Wade," I said.

The door would have slammed in my face, but the tomcat chose that moment to slip into the house. The door caught him midway and he let out a terrible heart-rending "Meeoow!"

"Oh, pussy, pussy," Mrs. Blount cooed, her voice lowered to a sickening sweetness, "did I hurt 'ums?" She opened the door a little wider and picked up the cat.

"I'm Mrs. Jeffrey Wade," I said hastily.

The eyes peered at me over orange cat fur. "Jeffrey?"

"Yes, Lottie's younger brother."

"Oh, yes, I heard there was another boy."

"Could I come in and talk to you?"

"What about?"

"I just wondered if you could recommend someone else, a

good children's nurse." She hesitated. "I'll only take a minute of your time." I felt like a brush salesman. But now that I was there I had to see her.

"Well . . . seeing as you're one of the family . . . I guess it's all right." She opened the door then, and let me through. A strong cat odor permeated the cluttered room. It was a small place crammed with heavy overstuffed furniture, clumsy end tables, a sofa decorated with crocheted doilies, two ponderous chairs. Stained satin pillows announced "San Diego Welcomes You," "Home Sweet Home," and "Greetings from Los Angeles." Two more cats slept, curled like tight balls, on the window ledge among potted ferns and African violets.

"Sit you down," she said.

I dislodged a cat from one of the ponderous chairs and sat. Mrs. Blount lowered herself onto the sofa across from me. She was enormously fat, not neatly stout, or pleasingly plump, but sloppily fat. The bulges and rolls spilled over from her jowls down through a shapeless brown housedress. Her elephant legs and puffy feet were stuffed into a pair of run-over slippers.

"So the boy's grown up and has a wife," she said. Mrs. Blount had a doughy complexion, colorless thick lips.

"He died in an airplane crash. He was a Naval pilot."

She made some kind of sound in the back of her throat. "It's a shame," she said. "I suppose he never got to see the baby."

The orange tomcat sniffed a moment at her legs then sprang to the sofa beside her. Mrs. Blount put out a fat, veined hand and stroked it. "Such a cute one, too," she said.

"No. Jeff was killed before the baby was born."

"Too bad. A real shame. Seems the family has had more than their share."

"Lottie's death was especially tragic," I said, offering Mrs. Blount an opening.

She clucked her tongue but made no comment. She kept stroking the cat. He began to purr. "What's your baby's name?"

"Marianne."

"Sweet name. Let me hold her."

Everybody wanted to hold Marianne. I gave my daughter, who had grown restless, over to her reluctantly. Mrs. Blount did not look too clean. She placed Marianne on her shallow

lap while the baby sat bolt upright, her bright eyes surveying the expanse of Mrs. Blount. "How old is she?"

"Eight months," I said.

"Big for your age, ain't you didums," she cooed, just as she had to the tomcat. The cat, meanwhile, was inspecting Marianne, its long tail switching from side to side.

I sat on the edge of the chair. "You have a way with children, Mrs. Blount. You wouldn't consider coming out of retirement?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't.

She didn't disappoint me. "No. Too old. Besides I got me my pension. A nice pension. Own my own home clear. The one next door, too. Poor Mr. Blount didn't have a penny when he died. Weren't for the Wades, I'd had to work."

"The Wades?"

"Yes. They give me a pension after I left."

"You must have been with the Wades a long time, then."

"I was Lottie's nurse," she said.

Two years. She had been with the Wades just two years. That was not a long time. And that was more than twenty years ago. Pension—or hush money?

Marianne had become engrossed with Mrs. Blount, twisting her head every now and then and looking up at the old lady's sweet, devastating grin.

"Sweetums, sweetums," Mrs. Blount murmured.

"You certainly are marvelous with children," I said. Marianne didn't seem to mind her grossness, her untidy appearance. My flattery wasn't difficult.

"I have the knack." Mrs. Blount rewarded me with a smile, showing a set of large yellowed false teeth.

"Was Lottie a good child?" I asked, plunging in again.

"Real good. Sweet thing. Just like didums here."

"Did she take after her father? I mean her coloring."

"No, she was like her Mom, a blonde." A slight frown appeared between her beady eyes. "Just in looks, though. Lottie was real bright."

"Mrs. Wade is unfortunate, I mean, in her mind. But she's a nice person."

"Maybe . . . but if I was you I wouldn't trust the baby to her."

"Why not?" I tried to make the question innocent and wide-eyed.

"Because"—she hesitated—"just take my word for it."

"Did you say that because of what happened to Lottie?" I pressed.

"I ain't a gossip. I ain't talking. If I had a loose tongue, I'd lost my pension a long time ago."

So it *was* hush money. But who was sending it to her? Ernestine? Mrs. Kingsley, in the name of the Wades?

"But don't you see, Mrs. Blount, I've *got* to know. How can I protect my own child if I don't know what I'm supposed to protect her from?"

"Just watch her. Take care of her. Don't trust nobody there. That's all. I can't say no more than that."

I sat twisting the long strap of my bag, while Mrs. Blount clucked her tongue at Marianne. The cat arched its back, then sat, licking its paws.

I tried a new tack. What could I lose? If she would accept one bribe, she might accept another. "I respect your loyalty to the family, Mrs. Blount. But I'm part of it now, too." I let that sink in. "I would keep whatever you told me confidential. And," I swallowed hard, "I'd be happy to give you something in appreciation for your trouble."

"I don't know. . . ."

I saw the wheels turning behind her doughy face. "I don't want you to think of it as a . . . bribe," I hastily put in, "just a gift from a grateful mother."

She bounced Marianne on her knees. Marianne giggled.

"It wouldn't be right. I promised. . . ."

Suddenly the cat jumped down from the sofa. He went to the door and began to meow.

"I give you my word of honor." I almost crossed my heart. "I won't tell. . . ."

She was silent, her beady eyes taking me in. I came over and sat beside her. She had a cat odor, too.

"One hundred dollars," I said, trying to keep the pleading, wheedling tone out of my voice.

"I don't know. . . ."

"Two hundred," I raised the ante. It was like being at some furtive, illegal auction.

She shook her heavy jowled head. "I got to think it over." Sitting so near I could see a flicker of fear in her eyes. But the fear was struggling with another emotion. I could see that. The money tempted her. "I'll come back," I insisted. "Tomorrow. I'll come back and bring the money."

She seemed relieved, as if I had given her a temporary reprieve. "Yes. Come back tomorrow. I'll think about it. And bring the little one. She and I are good friends."

I hardly noticed the ride home. The smell of Mrs. Blount and her cats still clung to me. I didn't think Mrs. Blount had been bluffing. She knew something. But what? And she was afraid, afraid to talk even to me.

I got out of the house very early the next morning. I left a note in the kitchen saying I had taken the baby on a long walk. I did not want to face any of them with explanations, or have to argue with Seward about his driving me.

It was a good hike to the bus stop and Marianne grew heavier with every step. I had the money safely tucked in my oversized bag. It had been a gray, overcast day when I had started but by the time I transferred to the East San Diego bus, patches of blue began to show in the sky and when I reached Crestline Avenue the sun was hot in a brilliant, cloudless sky.

I was within a half a block of Mrs. Blount's house when I noticed a small knot of people gathered on the sidewalk. Then I saw the police car, its light still flashing, parked at the curb. In front of the police car was a bright green ambulance. Marianne, in my arms, lurched painfully against me as I quickened my pace. It couldn't be Mrs. Blount. It was a neighbor, someone on the street, who had an accident, was hurt.

I made my way through the small crowd, several housewives in pincurls, an elderly woman with gloves and a black toque, a husky young man, two small boys, each with a popsicle—the usual melange drawn by disaster. There was a policeman standing outside Mrs. Blount's door. I went up to him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"An accident, lady," he said laconically. He was young, so young that he still had a sprinkling of acne across his face. He was chewing on a toothpick.

"Is Mrs. Blount hurt?" I asked.

"Did you know her?" For all his youth, his eyes, a sharp blue, were alert.

"Yes . . . I . . . uh . . . I came to see her yesterday." I didn't want to get involved, but the truth came out involuntarily.

"Live around here, lady?"

"No . . . no. I live on Point Lobos."

"You say you saw her yesterday?"

"Yes . . . you see, I came——"

"Come on inside, ma'am." He opened the door. "The Chief wants to talk to everybody who saw Mrs. Blount."

At that moment two men bearing a stretcher started out of the door. We stepped aside. On the stretcher was a large mound completely covered with a gray blanket. There was something frightening about that still, inert mound. I knew, without being told, that it was Mrs. Blount.

We stepped inside. The room was a shambles. Yesterday, it had seemed crowded; today it was thronged. People were milling about among the wrecked remains of what had been Mrs. Blount's parlor. Pillows had been pulled from the sofa, the chair ripped open, its dirty batting spilled out. A tall, heavy-based lamp had been overturned, the pleated shade crushed, the light smashed. The end tables with their bric-a-brac had been knocked over. A terra-cotta shepherdess gazed up at me out of sightless eyes. And the orange tomcat lay stretched out, dead, a bloody mess on the faded, rose-patterned rug.

A tall man dressed in a gray suit was talking to three other men. "Got your pictures?" he asked. "Fingerprints? Check with you later." The three men, like the stretcher bearers, departed while we stepped aside to let them out. The mob had been reduced to the policeman and I, the tall man, and a little fidgety woman who kept pushing a pair of glasses with Scotch tape at the temples back on her nose. The tall man spoke to her, "You can go now, Mrs. Jarvis. If we need you, we'll call. You live next door?"

"Yes," she said, twisting her hands. "Like I said, I'm Mrs. Blount's neighbor. Although *she* wasn't very neighborly. She didn't mingle, if you know what I mean. Kept to her cats. Them cats was like her children, you might say. She didn't have any of her own. She babied them. I could hear her talking to them like they was——"

"Yes, we have that information, Mrs. Jarvis. Thank you." He ushered her firmly to the door.

The young policeman spoke to me. "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Wade," I said, fighting down the urge to give him a false name. "Mrs. Jeffrey Wade."

The policeman turned to the tall man in gray. "Captain," he said, "this is Mrs. Wade. She said she saw Mrs. Blount yesterday. Came to see her from Point Lobos."

"What time was this?" said the captain.

He had green hazel eyes and they took me in with a perceptive glance. Marianne began to squirm and whimper. "Maybe you'd better sit down," he added. He stooped and replaced a pillow on the torn sofa. I had to step over the cat to get to the sofa, but I tried not to look at it. "Now what time was it?"

"About eleven o'clock in the morning," I said. "Between eleven o'clock and noon."

"I see." He had salt and pepper hair, gray eyebrows, hook nose. It was a bold, rugged face, almost handsome.

"Know Mrs. Blount long?" He extracted a cigarette case from the inner pocket of his jacket. He popped it open and picked out a cigarette. His fingers were long and elegant.

"No, I saw her for the first time yesterday." Marianne had grown more restless and struggled to get free. I shifted her from shoulder to shoulder while I talked.

"What about?" asked the captain. He lit his cigarette from a small silver lighter.

"I knew that she had been a children's nurse. I wanted to engage her." I wasn't going to give him my real reason for coming. I didn't see why that should matter. "What happened to Mrs. Blount?"

"She was shot," he said. "Seems there were rumors that the old lady had money hidden in the mattress." He waved his slim hand toward a door that had been shut the previous day. I looked through it into a small bedroom. I could just see the bed. It had been torn apart in a tangle of bedclothes, the mattress slashed and half pulled to the floor. "We figure some burglar got her. She was pistol whipped and then shot. Whether he got money or not we don't know. We don't know if the victim had any in the first place." He dragged at his cigarette and blew the smoke upward into a thoughtful spiral. "Why did you come back today, Mrs. Wade?" he suddenly asked.

For a moment I busied myself rearranging Marianne's dress. Then I answered, "She told me yesterday that she was retired, but that she would think it over." It was only the

partial truth. It made me feel less guilty to have something truthful to say.

"Hmmm," he said. "See anybody lurking about when you were here?"

"No. I probably wouldn't have noticed anyway."

"I suppose not," he said eyeing the baby with a cold glance. "Just leave your name and address with Gibbons here." He indicated the policeman who had stood guard at the door. "In case we need you for anything."

I gave Gibbons my name and address and went out into the bright, sweet sunshine. The collar of my dress was wet with perspiration, and I felt so drained, so exhausted, for one wild moment I did not know how I was ever going to make it back to Wade House.

FIFTEEN

All the way home I kept seeing the dead tomcat stretched out on the rose-patterned rug. I thought of the mound that was Mrs. Blount under the gray blanket. She had been pistol whipped and shot, the tall man with the elegant hands had said. There had been rumors that she had money. . . . That was it, I told myself. Some evil, desperate person in the vicinity had overheard someone talking at a lunch counter, a grocery store, on a bus. ("The old lady owns two houses. stuffs her money in the mattress.")

I was right not to have mentioned why I had really come to see Mrs. Blount. Mrs. Kingsley, Lottie, the Wade family had nothing to do with a robber and Mrs. Blount's death.

And yet it was a strange coincidence. Too strange, too pat. Mrs. Blount had been about to reveal something terribly important, something secret, something damaging to one of the Wades. But it was preposterous to think that anyone knew I was going there, that I had talked to Mrs. Blount. I had not even used the telephone. I had been careful of that. Then how . . . ?

In the afternoon, while Marianne napped, I sat on a chair near her crib, too tired to lay down, too wound up to relax. There were only three weeks left until April 12th when I would come into the inheritance. How would I ever endure another day? Fear was a ring closing in, slowly, inexorably. Why didn't I pack a few belongings, take the baby, and flee? Was it worth it, the anxiety, the waiting, the nerve-wracking uncertainty? If I left I would never have to see anyone in the Wade household again. Not Mrs. Kingsley, or Ernestine. Not even Tony.

Tony. I thought of the long kiss in the cupola, and it was like a nail driven through my heart. His brother had kissed me, too. And I had been foolish enough to give it a deep meaning, to think that it was love, when it had been nothing

of the sort. Did Tony's momentary passion serve to cover a resentment, a bitterness he felt toward me? I saw Tony's lean face again, his dark hair swept back from his forehead, his brooding eyes, his thin molded mouth—and I put my hands over my eyes as if I could block that image from my mind. I was drawn to Tony, there was no fighting the fact, and given different circumstances, or a less fearful, more trusting heart, I might even have been able to love him.

There was a tapping at the door. "Who is it?" I called. The door opened. It was Mrs. Kingsley. "Resting?" she asked in her special friendly tone, the friendly tone that was always suspect to me.

"Yes, I was tired," I said.

"Where did you go this morning?" she asked, attempting casualness. Her eyes were sharp, though, and curious.

"I ran into town for a sweater I saw yesterday, but didn't get. I thought I'd buy it today." How easily the lie came to my lips. Is that what fear did to people? Made them lie easily?

"What kind of sweater?" She looked about the room as if searching for it.

"I didn't get it, after all," I said. "It . . . the color didn't look right."

"That's so?" Did she believe me? "It's hard shopping with a baby," she said. "I'd be glad to look after her any time you want to go on your own." Her tone was ingratiating, false. I didn't trust her intimacies. What did she want?

"Is there anything you wanted?" I asked.

"No. No, I just stopped in for a moment. I was on my way downstairs. I've been up in the cupola, cleaning. The last of the Navy men has gone."

"The last? Aren't they sending any more?"

"No. I wrote to the Air Station and told them we couldn't take any more roomers. Ernestine hasn't been well. She's more nervous and upset than ever. I think it bothers her to have strangers in the house."

"She never seemed to mind." We hardly ever saw our roomers. Why should she mind? Or was this Mrs. Kingsley's way of indicating that it was *she* who didn't want them.

"Well, she did," said Mrs. Kingsley, her old decisive authoritativeness coming through. "She minded a lot."

Had Mrs. Kingsley written that letter because she didn't want others—others who might be inquisitive—in the house?

And why would she be worried about people who would be inquisitive? I didn't like the thought of the Navy men going. They weren't part of the household, but they were *there*. It took away the feeling that Wade House was isolated, remote from civilization. If anything horrible suddenly happened I could run up the stairs to the cupola and go for help. And now there was no one there. Mrs. Kingsley had seen to that.

"How's Marianne?" Mrs. Kingsley was saying. "I hardly get to see her." She tiptoed over to the crib. She bent over, her face visible to me, and smiled down at the baby. It was a possessive, greedy smile. It chilled me. I didn't like it. It was all I could do to sit quietly on the bed and hold my tongue. I wanted to tell her to leave. I wanted to tell her that Marianne was mine not hers, not even partly hers, although accident of birth might make it so. Instead I waited, my insides tied in knots.

"She's getting too big for that crib," said Mrs. Kingsley. "Soon she'll have to have a regular bed and a room of her own. She can have Jeff's old room. We could fix it up to make it more like a girl's room."

Separate me from Marianne? That's what she'd like. Mrs. Kingsley wanted nothing better than to get Marianne out of my reach, out of my sight. "There's time for that," I said.

After Marianne awakened from her nap we went out for our daily stroll. Marianne had graduated from her carriage, which had become too narrow and confining, to a stroller. She loved it. She would sit upright, looking around at the world, with her sparkling brown eyes, her dark head turning from side to side. Pride and love would chase everything else out of my mind as I would watch her straight little, curious body, with the little fringe of soft hair curling about the vulnerable nape of her neck.

It was a beautiful afternoon and I decided to walk on the grounds, for there had been a recent rain and myriads of assorted wild flowers were in bloom. Marianne, of course, didn't care where we walked.

We had gone some distance into the woods when I heard the faint yip-yipping of an animal in pain. It sounded like a dog. I followed the path in the direction of the cries. The path and the yipping noises led me to the abandoned well among the oak trees. There I saw a black and white mongrel with the floppy ears of a beagle and the markings of a terrier.

He had partly fallen through the rotted boards that covered the top of the well. He was stuck, his body half in and half out. I parked Marianne at the side and reached for the dog. He became very quiet, his great dark brown eyes watching my face as I tried to gently ease him out. But I couldn't move him. He was wedged in securely. I worked at the boards with my bare hands and got nothing but a splinter for my trouble. I picked up a stick to pry the board up. It was too weak and snapped in two almost at once. I looked around and found a stout, sturdy tree limb. It was clumsy, but it worked. I held on to the dog with one hand and with the other lifted the splintered board. When I had it up far enough, I pulled the dog out. It stood on its short legs, shook itself vigorously, then wagged a long tail and waddled off. Marianne, watching him disappear through the trees and underbrush, giggled.

I could see now that the top of the well, littered with leaves and dried grasses, was rotted through in quite a few places. I thought I might speak to Seward about it. Next time there might be a child, instead of a dog, who would wander into the ground, find the well and fall through.

Before replacing the board an impulse, idle curiosity, I suppose, made me look down into the depths. A shaft of sunlight had penetrated the dark oaks and had hit the well, as if it were in a spotlight, so that I could see down into the murky interior.

I wished I hadn't looked—for what I saw made me recoil in horror. For a brief minute I thought it had been a trick of light playing on my over-imaginative mind. So I looked again. Yes, I was right the first time. On a stony ledge half-way down a small skull grinned up at me. It couldn't have been an animal; the skull was bulbous, rounded in back. Wasn't that what a human skull looked like? Only this was small, like a child's. That must be it. Some child had died there, some small tot had fallen into the well and had lain there calling for help until its weak cries became weaker, and it died. And while it was sobbing "Mommie" with its last breath, some frantic mother was searching wildly for it. That mother could have been me.

No. I wasn't going to think about that. With shaking legs I trundled Marianne back to the house as fast as I could. Seward was pruning the hydrangea bushes below the porch.

"Seward! There's a skeleton in the well!"

He straightened up, rocking back on his heels, his mouth half open, his eyes narrowing against the sun. "A what? In where?"

"A skull. A human skull. It's in the well. It's a small one, all grinning, and horrible." I told him about the dog, and how I had pried the boards loose to free it, how I had looked into the well and what I saw.

"Some child must have fallen into it a long time ago," I said.

"It could have been some animal. A dog. A cat."

"No, no, I tell you. It's too big for that."

"But the well has been abandoned and boarded up for some thirty, forty years."

"I don't care how long it's been boarded up. I know what I saw. Come and see," I urged.

He got to his feet and placed his shears carefully on the front steps.

"All right," he said. "If you want. What good it will do now, I don't know."

I didn't exactly know either. It was just that I probably still hoped I had been mistaken. I didn't want a child dying—any child—such a horrible death. I started off again.

"Wait!" Seward called. "I'll get a ladder."

I stood impatiently in the warm sunlight while he went around in back. A bee hummed in the silence, settling finally on a hydrangea blossom. A quick little wind rustled the grasses. How could one think of death on an afternoon like this?

Presently Seward returned with a hammer and a long wooden ladder. "Come along," he said. "We'll see what you have there."

I bounced Marianne along the rough path, pushing her ahead of me, following Seward's limping gait. "Does the well still have water in it?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know," he said over his shoulder. It was rather awkward carrying that long ladder. "It was supposed to have run dry during Grandfather Wade's time."

We got to the well as the sun was slanting over the tops of the trees. Long shadows grouped themselves around the well. Seward used his hammer and in a matter of minutes he had several boards ripped up. Bracing myself I peered

over the top. The light was indistinct down there now, although I thought I could make out the white gleaming skull.

Seward took a flashlight out of his pocket and sent the yellow-white beam down. There was the skull. I thought I could see the remains of other bones. The ledge on which the skull rested was quite wide. To the right of it the well dropped into black nothingness.

"I'll be darned," said Seward. "Seems like when they first started to dig this well they hit rock, a pretty wide shoulder of rock, then they just moved over and dug the rest of the well without bothering to start another hole."

He got the ladder, lifted it over the side, and let it slide down until it rested on the ledge. The top of the ladder came up almost to the level of the opening. Seward stepped down to the first rung. "Hold the ladder, will you, Nancy?" he asked. I bent down and held it tightly, one hand on either side. He took a tentative step down, and then his face, only a few inches from mine, grimaced in pain.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's my knee, that trick knee of mine. It'll be all right in a minute."

"Let me go," I offered. "I don't mind. It doesn't bother me as much now." It probably happened a long time ago, I told myself. It wasn't any different than walking through a graveyard knowing that the dead, their white bones and skulls, were there.

"You really think it's necessary?" Seward asked.

"Not necessary, but I'd like to know. If it's human it ought to have a decent burial."

He shrugged and climbed off the ladder.

I took off my shoes, so that my toes could get a firmer grip on the rungs. Seward held the ladder with one hand, and arm; in the other hand he had the flashlight. I placed one foot after another carefully as if I were stepping on eggs. I dared not think of the black hole beyond the ledge. I kept going, one step at a time, until my feet touched the rough floor of the ledge.

I stood looking at the skull. It was attached to a small skeleton lying on its back.

"It's human," I called up. "The rest of it is here, too." Now that I was close I could see that the skull had a crushed place on the back and along one part of the side, as if it had

received a lethal blow, or had broken in the fall from the top. "It's got a broken head, Seward," I said.

"What?" he called down. Our voices echoed eerily in the shaft. "What did you say?"

"It's been . . . it must have fallen on its back and broken its head." Had it happened that way? "Play the light around, Seward." I looked carefully at the arms and legs. I couldn't tell whether they had been injured also. I was only sure of the head.

A terrifying thought came to me. What if the child had been hit on the head and then thrown into the well? Someone might have come sneaking up behind it while it stooped to pick a flower or stare at an interesting stone, and bludgeoned it into insensibility. The idea made the cold sweat break out on my forehead. "I think it was hurt," I said. "Oh, Seward, I want to get out. . . ."

Suddenly I was in stunning darkness. Seward had turned the light off. I looked up and saw his face framed in the dimming daylight. "What is it? Do you know what it is?"

"Haven't you guessed?" he said, almost sadly.

I didn't want to guess. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to think of the little girl who played on the beach and was supposed to have been drowned and whose body was never found.

"Is it . . . was it Lottie?" I whispered in terror.

There was no answer. Seward had not moved. He kept looking down at me.

"Tell me who it was. Tell me!" My voice was hoarse.

"Lottie," he said.

Even to the last I had hoped that it wasn't so. But I think I knew, deep down inside, knew, but was afraid that I was right.

And then to my horror, the ladder was slowly drawn upward. "Seward!" I screamed, grabbing for the ladder. "No!" He gave it a strong twisting jerk almost knocking me into the lower depths of the well.

"I'm sorry, Nancy, truly sorry. It is Lottie. And you don't know how sorry I am that you've found her."

"Was it Ernestine that killed her? Is that why everyone is protecting her?"

"No. It wasn't poor Ernestine," he said in a weary voice. "It was me."

SIXTEEN

I watched in hypnotized horror as the ladder slithered to the top and disappeared completely. Even when it was gone, I couldn't believe that Seward meant to leave me in the well. He was trying to frighten me, that was all. "Seward!" I called.

His head and shoulders appeared again at the opening. "You're not going to leave me here?"

"I have to, Nancy," he said.

"I won't tell a soul. I won't say a thing about the skeleton."

"My dear, that's what you think now, because you're frightened. But once you're out it will be different. Your conscience wouldn't let you be quiet."

"But why did you do it? Why did you kill an innocent child?"

"I didn't do it deliberately," he said with a sigh. "It was an accident. I had come down to Wade House for a visit a day before I was expected. I was walking along the top of the cliff, just above the cove, looking for the others. I saw Lottie down below on the beach playing in the sand. I bent over to call her, and accidentally dislodged a large rock. It fell and hit her square on the head. Something that would happen only once in a million years. No one was nearby. I had seen Ernestine climbing among the rocks around the bend of the cove. There was no outcry when it happened. Ernestine was still foraging among the rocks.

"I slid down the cliff. When I got to Lottie I could see that she had died instantly. I gathered her up then, and put her where you found her now, in the well. In those days the water came up pretty high covering the ledge. Maybe I wouldn't have put her in the well if I had known about the ledge."

"But it was an accident, Seward. You had no reason to do

such a thing. The police would understand. No one would blame you."

"No one, but Ernestine. And *she's* all that matters, that ever mattered."

"But to let Ernestine take the blame for Lottie's disappearance, surely——"

"Ernestine took the blame for carelessness. That wasn't easy. But far easier than to know someone she trusted and loved, yes loved, was responsible for Lottie's death. Even if it was an accident." His voice was louder now. It filled the well. "Do you think that I would let *anything* come between Ernestine's trust and me? *Anything*? I'd go to the rack first. Not even God himself could force me to break that trust."

"I understand, Seward. Believe me I do. I won't breathe a word," I promised desperately.

"No, Nancy, it won't do. I felt you were dangerous long before this. You were a stranger. You were inquisitive about Lottie. I tried to frighten you . . . a piece of string across the stairs . . . mercury in the Kahalua, but you didn't scare. And then you asked about Mrs. Blount. You were going to upset the applecart."

"Doesn't anyone else suspect about Lottie?"

"Mrs. Kingsley might. But she's always put the blame for Lottie's death on Ernestine. I think she may have guessed something, but she kept her mouth shut. She was pregnant at that time with Alec's child. Although she wasn't really sure it was his until Jeff was born. You see she had a brief affair with one of the soldiers at March Field during the time she was carrying on with Alec. I happened to find out, quite by accident. We never spoke of it, but there was a mutual silent agreement between us."

So that was why Seward had never reprimanded Mrs. Kingsley for her treatment of Ernestine. He was afraid to speak up, to incur her displeasure.

"And Mrs. Blount? She was here at the time."

"Mrs. Blount met me on her way back from the house to the cove. I never really knew if she had seen me put Lottie in the well. But I was coming from that direction, and I was sure if she ever got to thinking she would put two and two together. I offered her money right then, to keep quiet

about my being at Wade House that day. I made it sound as if I had come secretly to see Ernestine."

"Then you are the one who'd been paying Mrs. Blount all these years. And you are—" I didn't finish. I saw again the stretcher bearers and the mute, covered mound of flesh. I saw the bloody tomcat stretched upon the littered rug. How much had Mrs. Blount known? Had she seen Seward at the well? I remembered her warning to me about Ernestine. Had she thought Ernestine killed Lottie and that Seward had disposed of the body by putting it down the well? Possibly. I would never really know.

"I should have killed Mrs. Blount way back then," Seward was saying, "but she had a nosey husband. I couldn't afford the risk."

"You followed me yesterday. You must have. And then you shot Mrs. Blount and made it look like a burglary." Yes, he had done it, ripping the mattress, spilling the bric-a-brac, slashing the satin pillows that said "Welcome," "Greetings." He was a man who would murder for the sake of keeping himself the untarnished, trustworthy, loving ideal in the eyes of the woman he loved.

"For all your quiet ways, Nancy, you're sharp, too sharp," he said. "You'd have that figured out in no time, if I'd let you out. When you asked me about Mrs. Blount the other day, I suspected that you wanted to question her. So I followed you . . . and you know the rest." He said it in a cold-blooded calm way—as if he had been out on a harmless hunt and had bagged a fat gopher who had been feeding on his daisy beds.

It was the chill quiet of his confession that sent conviction slamming through me. Yes, Seward meant to leave me in that well. He was not scaring me. I was dangerous to him. Not so much because he was afraid that I would disclose his part in Lottie's death, but because of Mrs. Blount. Before I had come to Wade House and stirred things up, he had been a man caught up in a tragic accident which had tormented him for twenty-five years. Now, he was a murderer. And he meant for me to die, too.

I clasped and unclasped my clammy, trembling hands. The back of my neck ached from looking upward. "What will you tell the others?" I asked tremulously, thinking of myself trapped in the darkness of the well. And Marianne! Mari-

anne, without me. Helpless. Marianne, with her large button eyes, and the fringe of soft hair at her neck—alone. "What will you do to Marianne?"

"That will be easy. I'll wheel Marianne down to the beach at the cove. High tide will be coming up in another . . . let's see—"he put his arm up to look at his watch—"in another half hour. You and Marianne will have been caught by the tide. Fortunately I have your shoes here. I'll put them on a rock down there. That will give it the added touch."

It was going to be like Lottie's death. Only they would find Marianne's body and I would be in the well. "You can't do that, Seward, you can't," I pleaded. My mind was darting back and forth. As long as I could keep him talking I had a ghost of a chance. "All of us have secrets we don't want known." I thought of Mrs. Kingsley, Mrs. Blount. And then I thought of myself and Jeff.

"Do we?" Seward was saying. "And what kind of a secret would someone like you have?"

"I—I . . . Jeff didn't die in that plane crash," I said with desperation. "I killed him."

It was too dark to make out his face clearly. But I could imagine the glint of his blue steel eyes, the smile, as he said, "My dear Nancy, your conscience can rest clearly about that. You didn't kill him. I did."

I had thought that I had been through too much shock in the past hour to feel the effect of yet another. But his grim, icy words brought a gasping half sob to my lips.

"You see that gun you had, Nancy, was loaded with blanks."

"How did you know?"

"I know because I put them there. Some time ago. I couldn't allow an excitable, unreliable fellow like Jeff to have a loaded gun in his possession. Never know what fellows like that will do." He said it without realizing the irony of his words.

"You weren't even home that night. How could——?"

"Oh, but I was. You just *thought* I wasn't. I went off to my air-raid warden meeting, all right, but instead of going on to visit my friend I came back to the house. I even hid my car down the street to make it look authentic."

"But *why*? Why did you do it?"

"I was going to wait up for Jeff. I didn't know he was sup-

posed to be night flying. I don't think I really meant to kill him. Maybe I would have anyway. You see he was threatening to have Ernestine committed to an institution. I couldn't allow him to do that, could I?"

"Why should Jeff do that to his mother?"

"She wasn't his mother, although he didn't know that. He threatened her because he wanted money. Or rather he threatened her through me, since I handled Ernestine's financial affairs. Jeff had gambling debts, big ones. He didn't dare ask Mrs. Kingsley for the money. He was afraid of her, so he tried to get it from Ernestine. I refused to give it to him.

"I came back to the house because I was afraid Jeff would tackle Ernestine alone and put the pressure on her. If *she* had come begging for money it would have been hard for me to refuse. And I didn't see why that no-good free-loader should have anything from Ernestine. It was just lucky for me that you and he had that fight. I was standing in the study watching through a crack in the door. When your gun went off I thought it was a good chance to rid Ernestine of someone who was dangerous to her."

He got "rid" of Jeff as one squashes a bug. It meant no more to him.

"But his body," I said. "It was gone. . . ."

"Yes. I was going to replace your gun with mine, after I wiped off the fingerprints, of course. But then Tony came in, and when I heard him tell you that Jeff was supposed to have gone down into the ocean with his plane, I decided to throw his body over the cliff into the sea. I did it when you were in the kitchen with Tony. Then I just walked to my car and drove off to see my friend."

"I found that gun . . . Jeff's gun, in a raincoat pocket."

"Jeff's gun?"

"Yes. The same one I had that night. It was loaded with blanks. One was missing."

There was a silence. Then, "Ah . . . I made a stupid mistake. They were so much alike, both guns. I meant to put the other gun there. The one with the real bullets, just in case Jeff's body was found. But it hardly matters now, does it?"

Did it hardly matter? I thought of all the anguish and guilt I had gone through, the bad dreams, my suspicions of Tony and, I was sure, his suspicions of me.

Even after I had found the gun with the blanks, I hadn't

been certain. Now, Seward had removed that last doubt. But I wasn't allowed the comfort of relief. Not here in this hole. A murderer who had killed twice before had cornered me like a remorseless dog driving a dumb, terror-ridden animal into a trap.

The small piece of sky I could see above Seward's head was rapidly growing darker. I looked frantically around for some foothold; some jutting piece of earth or rock so that I could scramble up. But though the walls of the well were rough, not even an agile monkey would have been able to find a toehold.

"Seward," I called, trying to keep down the frantic hysteria welling in my throat. "You've got to listen to me. You can't go on killing innocent people. You can't. . . ." I was talking to the empty air. He had gone.

"Seward!" I screamed. There was a thumping sound, and a board fell across the opening. I screamed again and again.

"It's no use, Nancy." He had put his face to what was left of the opening. "No one will hear you."

Another board fell into place. "Don't hurt Marianne. For God's sake, don't hurt her!" I scrabbled at the dirt walls, trying to pull myself up.

Another board fell and I was left in darkness. It was the blackness around me that was most frightening. That, the smell of damp earth, and the skeleton at my feet made me feel like being interred in a grave. Buried alive! Oh, dear God, no! I beat upon the hard walls with my bare fists, my breath coming in hoarse moaning sobs. I did not feel any pain, did not care that my hands were becoming sticky with blood. I continued to flail at the unresisting wall until I fell exhausted to my knees.

I don't know how long I crouched there, spent, like some dumb cowering thing. Gradually my mind became clearer. Someone would find me. Someone would get to Seward before he reached the cove with Marianne. They had to. They must.

But who? Neither Mrs. Kingsley nor Ernestine had seen me go out. And if they had they would assume I had gone for a walk. Tony had not been at home. Later, when I did not return, and when it grew quite dark, they would look for me. By that time it would be too late. "The tide comes in in another half hour," Seward had said.

Seward would leave Marianne on the beach where the

waves were already rippling up, swallowing the small sandy beach. He would go back to the house, and then pretend to be concerned. He would lead the search. He would be clever, taking them around the grounds and then leading them to the cove. I remembered the flowers I had picked on my walk. Would somebody stumble on those? And if they did, what would it mean? A handful of wilted weeds. That was all. And once they got to the cove would they find Marianne's empty stroller, my shoes? Or would they, like Marianne, be washed away by the tide?

I buried my face in my grimy hands. "Oh, Marianne, Marianne, what have I done to you?" She would have to pay for my stupidity, my timidity. If I hadn't been afraid to go out into the world, afraid to leave Wade House and struggle, fight for my living, this would never have happened. I had been a coward—shrinking from people and situations that might have hurt me—all my life. For wasn't that why I had really married Jeff? Marriage was a way out for me, a way out from having to argue with Mother, from having to battle against her nagging, her stronger will.

And now I was face to face with the most horrible of realities. My child was going to be killed, and I was going to die. There was a taste of bitter gall in my mouth. I had come to self-realization too late. There wouldn't be any more problems for me to solve, no fearful decisions to make. I could no longer blame Ernestine, Mother, Mrs. Kingsley for my own shortcomings.

If I could only have one more chance, one more opportunity. . . . "Oh, Seward," I whispered, "please, please, let me out. . . ."

There was a silence up above, a dreadful, uncanny quietness sifting down and wrapping itself inexorably around me, tighter and tighter, choking me. I thought of the death that awaited me. It would be slow, agonizing, full of hope one moment, despair the next. How long would it take me to die? One day? Two? Maybe three? There was air enough seeping through the boards, but there would be the torments of hunger, of thirst. And all the while my mind would be busy blaming myself for Marianne's death, going over and over again all the improbable "if's."

It would be better to go right away, at once. I remembered the hole, the depthless hole, beyond the ledge. How easy it

would be to inch over to the edge and let myself fall. I would probably be unconscious before I hit bottom. It would be quick that way, much quicker, much simpler than sitting here in the smothering dark and waiting. And painless . . . I wouldn't feel it at all. Just a foot away and I would come to the edge. I was getting cold already . . . terribly cold. My limbs were stiff. There was ice along my spine, pinching at the nape of my neck. . . .

When I heard the murmur of voices above me I thought I had reached the point where my benumbed brain was speaking aloud to itself. There was a wrenching sound. I felt a rush of air. I looked up. I saw a star. It was far, far away. Then another board was torn away and a dark blob covered the star. "Nancy?" a voice said. A voice I recognized. A voice that I knew I wanted to hear. "Tony!" The name was torn from me in a ragged croak.

"We'll have you up in a moment," he said. "Hang on."

I cannot recall too clearly what happened after that. I was vaguely aware of lights being flashed into the well, and my closing my eyes because their brightness blinded me. After a few minutes I felt strong arms lifting me. I felt the rough shoulder and sleeve of a coat. "Put your arms around my neck, Nancy, I'm going to carry you up."

"Marianne?" I said. "Marianne?"

"She's all right. Don't worry about her." It was Tony carrying me, clumsily, but carefully up the ladder. At the top, strong hands grasped me and put my feet upon the solid ground.

I opened my eyes. I saw a ring of faces—Ernestine, trembling, Mrs. Kingsley, her mouth set in grim lines, and a tall man with bushy gray eyebrows. I could not see them all, but I noticed that Mrs. Kingsley was carrying something. I stepped shakily out of the light toward her. "Marianne!" I took my baby and I held her.

I could feel the warmth of her through her sweater. Warm and sweet-smelling. I ran my hand down her plump legs. She was all there, unharmed. "Oh, Marianne," I crooned bending my face toward hers. She reached out and yanked at my hair. I laughed. The laughter came welling up in me, crazy uncontrollable laughter. I laughed until the tears came running down my cheeks. Someone took the baby from me. I

couldn't stop laughing. It tore through me in painful gasps. It made the brooding, windless trees and the velvety star-sprinkled sky go around and around.

Someone was shaking me. I felt the sting of a slap across my face. "That's enough, girl. Be quiet. It's over."

It was Tony. He put his arm around me and the world righted itself. His arm was strong, steady. "Let's go back to the house. You can have a good cry there."

SEVENTEEN

I was sitting on the tufted sofa in the study. Tony, his arm still about my shoulders, was next to me. Somebody had brought a blanket and wrapped it around me because my teeth were chattering. "Marianne . . . I want to see Marianne," I kept saying. Mrs. Kingsley put her into my arms. I held her tightly, fiercely, hard. She began to cry. "She's hungry," I said.

"I'll give her her supper," said Mrs. Kingsley. She took the baby from me. I did not protest. I did not mind.

Marianne wriggled in Mrs. Kingsley's arms and stretched herself toward me. I half rose from the sofa.

"No," said Mrs. Kingsley firmly. "You rest here for a while. I can handle her. And Nancy," she hesitated, "I don't eat babies. You didn't think I'd ever separate you from Marianne, did you?"

I couldn't meet her eyes. Because that is what I did think. ". . . Because," she was saying, "I know what it means to have your own child taken from you. I'm not one hundred percent angel. Far from it. But I wouldn't stoop that low, even though Marianne is partly mine."

Even now I wasn't sure, and I felt ashamed of my feelings. I would never really like Mrs. Kingsley. But I wasn't afraid of her anymore.

"Come along, Ernestine," Mrs. Kingsley said. "You can help too."

Ernestine, her face paper white and streaked with tears, rose shakily from her chair. "Where've they taken Seward? What'll they do to Seward?"

"Never mind about Seward now," said Mrs. Kingsley in her old, rough way. "Are you coming?"

Ernestine, sniffing, followed her out the door.

It was then that I noticed the tall man in gray. He was

standing near the fireplace with a policeman. It was the same man who had questioned me at Mrs. Blount's the day before. "Who . . . how . . .?"

"How did we know you were down in the well?" asked Tony. "I must say you get yourself in the darnedest fixes."

"But how . . . how did *he* get here?" The tall man was watching me from under his gray bushy eyebrows.

"Let me explain," said Tony. "From the beginning, huh?"

"I came home around five-thirty this afternoon. Captain Holcomb was here. He was looking for you. He wanted to ask you a few more questions about Mrs. Blount's death. Mrs. Kingsley thought you had gone for a walk. So Captain Holcomb and I drove around looking for you. We went out to the Point and circled all the streets coming back but couldn't find you. Then we did a search of the grounds. We found Seward wheeling Marianne in her stroller just as he was going through the iron gate to the staircase that leads to the cove. I asked him where you were. He said that you had gone shopping in San Diego and that he was taking care of Marianne for you. It didn't ring true. I had never known you to leave Marianne with *anyone* and go off. 'When do you expect her back?' I asked. There was a funny look in his eyes.

"'Soon,' he said. 'I was just taking the baby for a walk.'

"'At this hour?' I asked. 'On the beach with the tide coming in?'"

"'We were just going to look at the water from here,' he said.

"I didn't believe him. I knew he was lying. I won't bore you with the details. He wasn't an easy nut to crack. I'm afraid I had to get a little rough with him. But I got the truth finally."

"Then you know——"

"That he killed Mrs. Blount . . . Jeff . . . yes. When he broke down, he spilled it all."

Captain Holcomb said, "We'll need a signed statement from you, Mrs. Wade. But we can get that tomorrow." He motioned to the policeman, and they left.

After they were gone, I said, "Whatever will become of your mother, now that Seward isn't here?"

"We'll just have to take care of her ourselves," he said. I looked at him and he smiled, a frank, alive, glowing smile.

"We," he had said. Was he teasing, baiting me again? For a moment a sarcastic retort came to my lips. But I bit it back. I remembered my vow in the well . . . if I only had a second chance . . . I would face reality . . . I wouldn't run away . . . I wouldn't retreat.

"What do you mean by 'we'?" I asked, uncertain still.

"Just what I said." And Tony smiled again.

I thrust the blanket from me then, and put my arms around his neck.

"We" can mean so many things.